

Studies in European Cinema

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Roussel, R. ([1914] 1996), *Locus Solus*, Paris: Gallimard.

Stroeter-Bender, J. (1995), *L'Art contemporain dans les pays du "Tiers Monde"* (trans. O. Barlet), Paris: L'Harmattan.

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Editorial

Owen Evans and Graeme Harper

Writing recently in *Sight and Sound*, Nick James observed with some irritation that the BAFTA award nominations excluded several European films of quality, such as Jacques Audiard's *A Prophet*, from contention in the Best Film category, by 'relegating' them to the Best Foreign Picture category. In the end, Audiard's film won that award very deservedly. This segregation naturally mirrored the situation at the Oscars, where *A Prophet* and Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon* were both nominated in the Foreign Picture category – losing out to Juan Jose Campanella's *The Secret in their Eyes* from Argentina.

That is not to say that there weren't English-language films worthy of recognition this year, and in many people's eyes Kathryn Bigelow's visceral *The Hurt Locker* was deserving of its success: *The Guardian's* Peter Bradshaw was a notable supporter. Nevertheless, this ongoing tendency to apartheid by the Anglophone film community does suggest that Thomas Elsaesser may have been overly optimistic in his assertions that European cinema exists face-to-face to Hollywood with a mutual ebb and flow between them, albeit with an unequal power dynamic. Not so long ago it did appear as if there might be something of a sea change in the offing, with a striking dearth of originality in mainstream Hollywood productions, which relied principally on ongoing franchises and remakes, and a wealth of talent emerging right across Europe. Alas, the Oscar victory of *Slumdog Millionaire* last year seems to have been something of a false dawn, and if we can be grateful for small mercies, then it is that the overly hyped *Avatar* did not make any inroads in any of the major categories. We can but wonder if the tools of film technology – of which European cinema has certainly benefited, and often pioneered – define film-making or if film-making should, indeed, define the application of those tools.

So, is the situation James highlighted going to change? Does it really matter? In one way, of course, the Oscars or the BAFTAs do not necessarily reflect the vitality, or not, of the film industry. As one commentator suggested, the Oscars matter in the United States because the movie stars are akin to royalty. And the BAFTA ceremony? Does it simply function a little like the Golden Globes, as the curtain raiser for the main event, while simultaneously reflecting a very British attempt to bang the drum for the industry on these shores? In many ways, it is hard to shake this impression. Nevertheless, the event does retain something of a developmental role, championing new faces and talents in a way that its American cousin does not.

But for European films, of course, some degree of recognition or exposure *does* matter at these prize-giving fests, in terms of improving the chances of securing a decent level of distribution to cinemas or funding for a future project. Surely Danny Boyle's next project is going to arouse interest simply because of the (unlikely?) success of his last film. And Andrea Arnold has produced two feature-length films to great critical, and some commercial, success in the wake of her Oscar success in 2005 for her short film *Wasp*.

Film festivals are important in the same way for raising the profile of film productions from Europe. The principal beneficiary of exposure thus acquired in recent times is the aforementioned Haneke, whose *Hidden* secured mainstream distribution in the UK following success at Cannes, and whose *The White Ribbon* has reaped similar benefits as a result of its Palme d'Or. All of which makes the aberration of his remake of *Funny Games* even harder to fathom...but let's not dwell on that any longer! But for all the glitz of Cannes and its media coverage, there is nothing quite like the Oscars for providing an alchemic impetus. And if people talk of such a phenomenon as 'the festival film', the type of production created to garner awards in Venice, Berlin or Sundance, it seems one might also discern the 'film prize film'. The prime suspect here is von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others*, which was constructed with great care to press all those buttons that would make it a strong contender for global recognition and transcend its original national context. While many Germans lamented the liberties taken with the truth of life in the GDR, the director was arguably far more concerned with refashioning Hollywood melodrama for twenty-first century audiences, and Academy members in specific.

But let's not be too churlish about this success and those other European prizewinning films. They keep the spirit of European cinema alive on a global platform, as do the notable successes of European actors, such as Christoph Waltz (*Inglourious Basterds*) this year, whose Oscar's acceptance speech showed as much about Europe's relationship with Hollywood, as it did about Waltz's relationship with Quentin Tarantino. Waltz's success, this year, coming along with a string of other nominated performers from Europe, Colin Firth and Helen Mirren to cite but two. Despite the ongoing struggles for film funding and distribution, such successes remain important and allow journals such as ours, and organisations such as the European Cinema Research Forum (ECRF), which is ten years old this summer, to act as platforms to celebrate all that is exciting about film in Europe, and from outside Europe but borne on a European heritage.

In This Issue . . .

In this double issue of *Studies in European Cinema*, we decided to collate a series of papers on Italian cinema together to form a special strand in the first half. Despite having been the birthplace of the first of the important postwar new waves, Italy has perhaps faded a little from view in recent times, overshadowed by resurgences in French, German and Spanish

cinema and the arrival of Romanian cinema as arguably the newest new wave. It seems fitting therefore to celebrate Italian cinema, not least because we received a large number of high-quality submissions which serve to remind us that it is alive and kicking, drawing from its influential origins.

So it is that we open the special strand of this issue with two articles on Vittorio de Sica, one of the iconic figures of postwar cinema. Robert Rushing's reading of de Sica's *The Children are Watching* (1943), often seen as a precursor to neorealism, underlines significant differences between it and the films that followed. However he identifies common ground in the representation of adult female sexuality and the transience of childhood innocence. Elena Lombardi then examines the narrative constellation of *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), identifying the influence of both Marx and Freud, together with elements of the picaresque novel, with all three elements entwining in the scene on the bridge. What emerges in Lombardi's reading is just how deceptively complex the apparently simple aesthetic of neorealist cinema can be.

Mario Cupolo evokes one of the other key figures of Italian cinema, Pier Paolo Pasolini, in his examination of *The Best of Youth* (2003), Mario Tullio Giordana's mapping of changes in Italian cultural attitudes. Cupolo argues that the film articulates Pasolini's pessimism about Italian society's evolution in the postwar period, as expressed in the director's anthologies of poetry rather than his films. Paul Sutton then offers his insight into the work of contemporary director Nanni Moretti, whom he dubs a 'total filmmaker', and explores the way in which he engages with the public sphere in Italy, and most especially the maverick Silvio Berlusconi in *Il Caimano* (2006). In particular, Sutton examines what he dubs the 'dangerous representational game' Moretti plays in the film in seeking to censure the current Italian premier.

The special Italian strand concludes with Franco Manai's article on Roberto Benigni's *Pinocchio* (2002) and its vexed reception in the United States, despite the director's earlier Oscar for *Life is Beautiful* (1997). Manai argues that the film fell victim to an agenda designed to promote cultural homogenisation, when in fact the film itself celebrates the regional and national, which in essence fittingly brings us back to Nick James's lament about the marginalisation of foreign-language films at events such as the Baftas and the Oscars.

The second half of this double issue then explores films from five different national contexts, in line with our ethos for celebrating the diversity of European cinema in each volume of *Studies in European Cinema*. Thomas Martinec offers an intriguing reading of Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire* (1987) which traces the literary sources which form the fabric of the film, principally poems by Rainer Maria Rilke and Peter Handke. What Martinec proposes is that the film should be approached as a sound poem, 'an attempt to "speak" the language of poetry on screen'.

Paul Melo e Castro then presents a fascinating examination of Fernando Lopes's *Belarmino* (1964), a documentary about the eponymous Portuguese boxer. But as Castro argues, drawing inspiration from the

concept of the *flâneur*, the film is as a depiction of the plight of Lisbon, and indeed Portugal, at the time of the film's production as a reflection of the life of the protagonist. David Forrest then provides a provocative, and convincing, attempt to redefine our understanding of British realism by looking at the work of Shane Meadows. Forrest tests the continued application of Andrew Higson and John Hill's class-orientated engagement with the British New Wave, by advocating less reductive readings that explore notions of authorship and aesthetics, as opposed to the purely sociological interpretations that have tended to predominate.

Similarly, Marit Knollmueller lays down a marker in her article on Amenábar's *Open Your Eyes* (1997), by challenging common perceptions of the director as a purveyor of mere popular entertainment inspired by Hollywood productions. Instead, Knollmueller uncovers a network of references to dreams and dreaming which alludes both to literary traditions explored by the great Spanish literati Cervantes and Calderón, as well as the surrealist film work of Buñuel and Dalí. In this way, she makes a very convincing case for reassessing the director's canon.

We conclude the issue with Brian Goss's close reading of Thomas Vinterberg's *Festen* (1998), the first of the films produced according to the 'commandments' of Dogme95. Goss provides a detailed textual reading of the film through the prism of ideology, but also places the film very squarely in a Danish film tradition, as well as testing how closely it adheres to the tenets laid down in the 'vow of chastity'. What emerges as a result is how the 'strictures' of the commandments do not restrict *Festen*'s ability to strike many varied and sonorous chords.

It may well be that European cinema is always going to have to fight vigorously for airspace and airtime when it is constantly overshadowed by Hollywood's hegemony, which events such as the Oscars simply perpetuate. But as the present issue hopefully makes abundantly clear, there are rich traditions underpinning the work produced across Europe which continue to inspire and stimulate. What is more, there is a wealth of passionate scholars worldwide who are all acting as lobbyists and champions for these films, and *Studies in European Cinema* is proud to stand as a platform for their work.

De Sica's *The Children Are Watching Us*: neorealist cinema and sexual difference

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Abstract

De Sica's I bambini ci guardano/The Children Are Watching Us (1943) is typically celebrated as 'proto-neorealist', in part because it is often considered the first collaboration between De Sica and Zavattini. Indeed, apart from De Sica's and Zavattini's collaboration, the film has little in common with neorealism – it has glossy production values, special effects and professional actors. It does share with other films of Italian neorealism, however, a tendency to firmly place the blame for catastrophic historical and personal events on women, especially on female sexual desire; often the failure of a particular woman to restrain her desire may seem like a regrettable if incidental fact, but the cumulative effect of such films is both to suggest that 'girls can't be heroes' (Roma: città aperta/Open City (Rossellini, 1946)) and to regret that neorealism's child protagonists (invariably male) cannot remain forever in an innocent world unmarked by sexual difference. Through a close reading of The Children Are Watching Us in the context of other neorealist films, this article suggests that some of neorealism's central concerns may be rather different than generally thought.

Keywords

De Sica
gender
neorealism
sexual difference

Introduction

Like *Sciuscià/Shoeshine* (1946), De Sica's *I bambini ci guardano/The Children Are Watching Us* (1943) is typically considered 'proto-neorealist'. It is worth pointing out the conditioning effect that neorealism has exerted on the Italian film canon, especially as understood in the United States (see, for instance, the revealing title of Peter Bondanella's *Italian Cinema: from Neorealism to the Present* (2001), which offers all of Italian film with one hand and takes away half of it with the other). The Italian films of principal critical interest before neorealism are those films that anticipated neorealism, those that can be read as precursors.¹ This desire to find the precursors to neorealism leads to some unexpected places. Rossellini, for instance, did direct some earlier films that demonstrate a neorealist aesthetic (especially the documentary look), but unfortunately they were more or less explicitly in the service of the fascist régime (if not precisely 'fascist' themselves), so they have been largely ignored. One of the films frequently pointed to as an aesthetic precursor to neorealism is Alessandro Blasetti's *1860* (1934), which makes use of location filming, non-professional actors and regional dialect. Unfortunately again, Blasetti was also a

1 This is true in the other direction of time, as well, where Italian film after neorealism is seen as a series of responses, reconfigurations and homages – see Millicent Marcus' *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

- 2 At the same time, one cannot help but note the incredible sparseness of scholarly work on De Sica – outside of Bazin's early praise and a series of articles by Bert Cardullo, there has been remarkably little. As Cardullo noted in 'The Children Are Watching Us', *The Hudson Review*, 54: 2, 2001, 'Despite his historical as well as artistic importance, De Sica curiously was never the subject of a single critical book in English until the year 2000, when the University of Toronto Press published a collection of essays [...]' (Cardullo 2001: 1, n. 1). The work that does exist tends to concentrate on *Umberto D.* One recent exception is G. Mecchia, 'The Children Are Still Watching Us, *Caché/Hidden in the Folds of Time*', *Studies in French Cinema*, 7: 2, 2007, pp. 131–41, discussed briefly below.
- 3 See, for instance, G. Brunetta, *Cent'anni di cinema italiano*, Rome: Editori Laterza, 2004, p. 200.

relatively enthusiastic supporter of the fascist régime, and *1860* also does not enjoy a wide circulation or screening. Neither Rossellini's prewar films in support of the fascist regime nor Blasetti's film have been restored or transferred to DVD in the United States or the United Kingdom.

The Children Are Watching Us, on the other hand, has seen the deluxe DVD restoration and release provided by the Criterion Collection, marking it as of explicit interest to cinephiles, a 'quality film' worthy of the canon.² Indeed, *The Children Are Watching Us* is beautifully shot and – a De Sica trademark – makes incredibly effective use of its principal actor, a young boy who suffers through his parents' separation and his father's eventual suicide. In fact, the suffering of the young boy – a plot that became so stereotypical of neorealist film-making that it is a principal target in Maurizio Nichetti's neorealist parody, *Ladri di saponette/Icicle Thief* (1989) – is one of two reasons this film is considered proto-neorealism at all. But in fact, in some ways the film seems almost programmatically non-neorealist: it is concerned with the sentimental troubles of a middle-class couple (the wife has a lover she cannot let go of); the production values are extremely high, even glossy; the actors are professional with the exception of the young boy; the action takes place in a world devoid of history without any hint that Italy is in the middle of a war; and dialect is not used except to be made fun of (in accordance with the fascist linguistic codes under which the movie was made).

Nothing makes the film's proto-neorealist status more problematic than an extended special-effects sequence (the phrases 'special-effects sequence' and 'neorealism' in themselves seem antithetical, although De Sica was always capable of something more like 'magical neorealism', as in the 1951 *Miracolo a Milano/Miracle in Milan*) when Pricò, the young star of the film, suffers from a fever and begins to imagine a series of ever more surreal images projected on his train window. This fever sequence seems modelled on a nearly identical sequence from a film that could not be further removed from the neorealist program: *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939). The scene is when Dorothy, in the middle of the tornado, looks out of her window and sees a succession of bizarre images – cows caught in the tornado, two men in a rowboat waving at her – culminating in the transformation of Miss Gulch on her bicycle into a witch on her broomstick. Any doubts the viewer might have about this reference to an escapist Hollywood film would appear to be dispelled when, less than a minute into the fever montage, for two bars, the score for De Sica's film duplicates *note for note* the score from *The Wizard of Oz* during the same tornado sequence (and yet the quotation becomes uncanny and apparently impossible when one considers that *Oz* would not be released in Italy until 1947).

So what makes this film 'proto-neorealist', besides the standard neorealist device of the suffering child? The other reason it has become enshrined in the Italian film canon is that it is the 'first' collaboration between De Sica and Zavattini.³ Of course, De Sica and Zavattini are the Bogart and Bacall of Italian neorealism and after: together they created *Ladri di biciclette/Bicycle*

Thief (1948); *Shoeshine*; *Miracle in Milan*; *Umberto D* (1952); *Stazione Termini/Terminal Station* (1953); *Ieri, oggi, domani/Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (1963); and *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini/The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (1970). Naturally one would hope that this miraculous series of films would not simply begin with *Bicycle Thief*, but might extend backwards to before the end of the war. In this way, the genesis of at least one strand of neorealism can be pinned down to the fateful meeting of two personalities. This is partly what Philip V. Cannistraro refers to when he outlines the critical sense of De Sica's canonical neorealist phase as running from *The Children Are Watching Us* to *Umberto D* – even as he undoes that periodization by insisting that De Sica's works must be understood in a larger historical context (Cannistraro 1975: 91).

Like so many of the accounts surrounding the origins of neorealism (such as Rossellini using scraps of film stock bought in the flea market as he was filming *Roma: città aperta/Open City* (1945)), however, it is not actually true. De Sica and Zavattini first collaborated as director and screenwriter for the charming but superficial *Teresa Venerdì* (1941), an absolutely standard fascist-era romantic comedy. True, Zavattini was not credited, but this seems rather beside the point: the myth of the magic collaboration between neorealism's greatest theorist, Zavattini, and its most popular director, De Sica, seems impossible to resist. One could wonder at this point why a cinematic movement that supposedly revealed a kind of objective truth on screen has been one of the central generators of cinematic myth.

I want to argue, however, that, despite its glossy production values, professional actors, melodramatic lighting schemes, reliance on close-ups of tear-filled eyes, ahistorical setting and so on, *The Children Are Watching Us* really is a precursor to 'proper' neorealism. This neorealism has less to do with the film's formal or aesthetic qualities, or its bleak depiction of childhood suffering, than with an apparently incidental quality – the way in which it portrays the young male subject's shocking and traumatic fall into history as the fault of adult female sexuality. As in other neorealist films (and perhaps especially those of De Sica), the young boy's trauma is presented as an accidental or chance event, a weakness or failure, or even simply bad luck. But singular events in neorealism, as Marsha Kinder noted some time ago, tend to have a 'pseudo-iterative' function – they represent what happens again and again, what is true of the collective masses. This feature has been noted in a positive key for some time, and Kinder notes approvingly that 'the neorealist *intoxication with the iterative* immerses the spectator, not in [...] emotional intensity [...], but in the ideological relations between individual and collective experience' (Kinder 1990: 11, original emphasis). I would like to suggest here that De Sica's film, and perhaps neorealism more generally, also conceals rather less-progressive 'ideological relations between individual and collective experience', however, in particular the dream of a kind of prehistory before knowledge of women ruptured the world – a very cinematic dream.

Working girls and film

The Children Are Watching Us opens with a scene that appears innocuous: a mother leaving her apartment building in Rome and taking her young son for a walk in the park. Any good director knows that there is only one thing that can be done with scenes of apparent innocence – although De Sica had not read Slavoj Žižek's description of the 'Hitchcockian blot', he was certainly aware that plots need something to go wrong at the beginning, a piece to go out of place, something to go awry. Žižek, of course, argues that in a series of Hitchcock films, scenes of apparent normalcy or innocence are stained by the appearance of a blot, a tiny imperfection in the frame that grows larger as the sequence progresses. Perhaps the best example is Thorwald's cigarette in *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954). As Jeff (Jimmy Stewart) watches Thorwald's apartment, where he suspects a murder has taken place, it appears deserted, empty, unmarked by traces of the murderous desire Jeff suspects. And then the tiny red glow of the end of a cigarette pulsing slowly as Thorwald leisurely smokes, a kind of post-coital satisfaction after doing away with his wife. That red, glowing pulse returns at the end of the film when Jeff fires off flashbulbs in Thorwald's face, trying to stop Thorwald from killing *him*. This time, the pulsing red glow of Thorwald's murderous desire spreads to fill the entire frame. For Žižek, this stain, this Hitchcockian blot, is always the mark of a transgressive or prohibited desire (Žižek 1992: 88–106).

At first glance, the opening sequence of *Children* remains 'unstained' for some time. The mother exits the building, chats briefly with a neighbour, proceeds to the park, watches a puppet show with her son and then sends him off to play on his scooter. Most viewers will notice, however, that by the time Nina and Pricò, the mother and son, leave the puppet show, Nina seems oddly brusque with her son and somewhat nervous. The real blot, however, occurs somewhat later, as Pricò finishes playing with another young boy and goes to look for his mother. He finds her – but with a man who is not his father. As the title of the film would suggest, these scenes of forbidden or illicit desire are invariably observed by little Pricò, who both understands and does not understand what he is seeing (he understands enough that he refuses to greet Roberto, his mother's lover).

At second glance, however, the viewer might note that the puppet show is a foreshadowing of the basic plot of the movie. It is itself a kind of blot, a publicly sanctioned depiction of illicit desire. In the show, a woman is courted by two male rivals, and she eventually decides to leave one and go off with the other (the losing rival drops down in a way that might even prefigure Pricò's father's eventual suicidal fall). This is less foreshadowing than a 'dumb-show', a simplified version of the theatrical presentation that follows it, a kind of synopsis to help the viewer follow the plot. Crucially, however, it also suggests that there is some relationship between the action of the film and the public spectacle, entertainment. The key to the tragic story that unfolds, in fact, is not that a mother abandons her son and husband for an apparently worthless man, nor even the emotional

devastation inflicted on the father and son, but that it is inescapably, repeatedly, precisely a *public spectacle*. It is observed by and commented on by neighbours and strangers alike, and it is precisely this public character that makes life impossible for the father – recognizing that Pricò cannot grow up where everyone recognizes him as the son of a fallen woman, he places the boy in a church-run boarding school and then commits suicide.

This link to the problem of public spectacle appears in at least two other key scenes. In the first, Nina has returned to her husband, Andrea, and been forgiven. Andrea attempts to give them a new start by taking his wife on a seaside vacation. The sequence begins with an establishing shot of the whole resort and then cuts to a close-up of a photographic apparatus (it has an old-fashioned timer, so that a family might take their own portrait). Andrea rushes back to where his wife and son have arranged themselves in front of a sailboat drawn up on the beach, preparing a kind of visual counter-narrative to the puppet show or the film we have seen up to now: an image of the perfectly happy bourgeois family on vacation. But this, too, is a public spectacle, and, unseen by the family, a boy sneaks into their photo at the crucial moment and sticks out his tongue. The attempt to create a scene of innocence or normalcy seems destined to fail, always marred by Žižek's blot. In the second scene, a magician arrives to perform a series of tricks for the vacationers, and as Nina attempts to enjoy the performance, she realizes first that the man sitting with her is attempting to seduce her; second, that Roberto has followed her to the resort, and is in the audience, as well; and third, that she is being watched disapprovingly by her fellow vacationers, one of whom lives in her apartment building back in Rome. What I want to call attention to here is not merely that these attempts at innocent enjoyment always reveal a stain of transgressive desire, or even that they are linked to public spectacle, but that such scenes are invariably linked to entertainment: puppet theatre, photography, the magic show. This particular constellation of forms of entertainment cannot help but suggest a larger meta-critique. Can De Sica seriously be talking about anything other than cinema, the most perfect *mélange* of theatre, photography and magic tricks?

And indeed, if we return to the film's opening sequence we will find that the earliest blot, the earliest moment in which something is not as it is supposed to be, is also the first dialogue of the film. Nina exits the apartment building with Pricò and is hailed by her nosy neighbour (the very same who will appear at the seaside resort, who constantly appears at the apartment door to verify that Nina has run off with another man – the one who eventually convinces Pricò's father Andrea that the only solution to his public humiliation is suicide). The neighbour reminds Nina that they were supposed to go to the cinema, a date that Nina calls off ostensibly to take Pricò to the park, but actually to meet her lover. Cinema is interrupted in this film – it is what does not get to happen. In a later scene, just after Nina has returned to Pricò, she is in the act of promising him a trip to the cinema when the father's return interrupts her. As far as the viewer can tell, Pricò is treated to nearly every form of entertainment *except* cinema.

So what is De Sica's stance here; What is the meta-critique? *Children* seems, at the most ostensible level, to be suggesting that cinema is in fact *unlike* these other forms of entertainment – it appears to be saying, 'if only Nina and Pricò had gone to the movies, how many misfortunes could have been prevented!' After all, if Nina had gone to the movies (with her gossipy, watchful neighbour) she would not have been tempted by Roberto in the park, would not have left. If the cinema had been the family choice rather than the resort, perhaps the film's second, greater tragedy could have been avoided. The cinema seems to be defined, in short, as the place where the interloper, the temptation, Roberto, cannot go.

But this will not stand. The cinema was of course notorious as *precisely* the place one would go to meet a lover, the place that offered the cover of darkness and inspirational stories of love both triumphant and tragic. *Children Are Watching Us* inevitably depicts exactly the kind of blot on normalcy that it suggests at the same time cinema might have avoided. And De Sica's later neorealist films offer a consistently anti-cinematic critique: in *Bicycle Thief*, the tragic loss of Antonio Ricci's bicycle – which is also the loss of his livelihood, his dignity, his family – takes place against the backdrop of provocative posters for Rita Hayworth's *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946), while *Umberto D* shows us the same loss of dignity, namely, Umberto being evicted from his apartment, against the backdrop of the movie theatre next to his home. The relationship between Umberto's loss and the cinema is more direct than one might suppose: he is evicted precisely because his landlady is marrying the owner of the cinema, and wants to evict her mostly poor tenants and transform her apartment into a respectable bourgeois space. Both of these spaces are 'stained' by adult sexuality as well: Umberto's landlady rents out the rooms by the hour to couples. In fact, these last two examples point us to precisely what De Sica is critiquing in *The Children Are Watching Us*, and where he is trying to position his viewers. The problem with cinema is the same as the problem of the world: adult sexuality, specifically *female* adult sexuality. What he offers is a kind of fetishistic cinema, not so much in Laura Mulvey's sense in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1987), but in precisely the sense of Octave Mannoni's famous phrase 'I know very well, but all the same'. De Sica knows perfectly well that cinema is 'dirty', stained from its beginning by adult sexuality, but holds out the dream of a world before the full acceptance of sexuality (the world of Pricò in *The Children Are Watching Us*, of Bruno in *Bicycle Thief*, of the boys in *Shoeshine*), in particular the dream of a world that has not discovered female sexuality. This is the link between De Sica's brand of the fetish and Mulvey's – both ultimately aim at a disavowal of symbolic castration, the recognition of sexual difference. This is why women and girls are all treated with suspicion, if not outright hostility, in De Sica and Zavattini's films.

Indeed, there is hardly a female figure in *The Children Are Watching Us* who escapes this suspicion and hostility. As Marcia Landy has noted, 'the women in the film are associated with experiences of violence, rejection and

abandonment' (Landy 1986: 67). Only Agnese, the completely unsexed maid, older and dumpy, is a reliable source of comfort for little Pricò. Particularly telling in this film are the minor characters, those who play no role in the plot. Immediately after Nina first abandons her husband, Andrea takes Pricò to Nina's sister so that he can go to work. Nina's sister is a seamstress who specializes in women's undergarments. Pricò is handed over to the three young women who work in the shop, who promise him that he will 'have fun' with them. But instead of entertaining the little boy, the working girls discuss their boyfriends, with one of them detailing her sexual liaison the night before (when asked if she stayed the night in his apartment, she responds 's'intende', subtitled as 'of course', but more precisely 'one understands' – it goes without saying, in short). Here, too, female sexuality disrupts entertainment, and no viewer can miss the connection De Sica and Zavattini establish here: this is more of the same, the same adult sexuality that has ruined Pricò and his father – *s'intende*.

In a series of shots in the workroom Pricò's isolation from this world of adult sexuality is made increasingly clear, and the shots equally showcase precisely what Mulvey predicts in a fetishistic evasion of sexual difference: the fragmentation of the female body. The *mise-en-scène* is crucial here, because the entire sequence plays out in a workroom filled not with mannequins of female bodies, but with fragmentary pieces of mannequins: a leg, a torso, an incredibly elongated neck and so on. Pricò crouches awkwardly and defensively in a corner and significantly cuts pieces out of magazine pages depicting female forms – in the foreground, a stockinged mannequin's leg lies across the table, and a torso with a partially covered breast intrudes into the frame from the right (again, Landy notes that Pricò 'lives in a world of women' (Landy 1986: 67)). After the working girls have left, a 'Commendatore' arrives – Nina's sister is his mistress, and his rich suit and diamond ring call attention to his wealth and prestige. He seats himself precisely in the middle of this collection of female body parts, dramatically lit by a single light bulb above him. In doing so, he once again marks his status, not only as an alpha male in a social or economic world, but also the world of adult sexuality. As he is in life, here, too, he is surrounded by idealized female forms, unthreatening precisely in their fragmentary nature that permits the viewer a kind of scopophilic pleasure without actually presenting actual sexual difference in the form of the whole female body. Pricò remains literally in the margins, at the far edge of the frame, his body incompletely captured by the camera. In a repetition of the earlier scene between his mother and Roberto at the park, the Commendatore attempts to gain recognition from Pricò – he smiles at him. Pricò, again recognizing what the Commendatore represents, withholds that recognition, turning back to his 'meal' of candy (another way that he is ruined by his mother's inability to restrain her sexual desire). The Commendatore frowns: his easy assumption of masculine solidarity (here we are, two men in this ridiculously feminine locale) is denied by Pricò, who sees instead a fundamental division: on the one side are adults who

live in a traumatic and incomprehensible dimension of sexuality, and on the other are children and the maid.

The reason I call attention to the question of recognition is that according to Freud, and later to Mulvey, the question of cinema and sexual difference, the acknowledgement of adult sexuality, turns precisely around the question of *recognition*. What is recognized and what is denied, what is denied and what is disavowed? The path from immaturity to maturity that Freud delineates is a path that leads from denial to disavowal to recognition. In the earliest stage, the little boy *denies* sexual difference (everyone has a penis). In a later stage, he may *disavow* sexual difference, either through the phallic mother (it is true, women do not have it, but mama does) or through a fetishistic structure (I know very well that sexual difference exists, but all the same [...]). As Mulvey notes, the mature *recognition* of sexual difference also comports a specific threat to male narcissism; however, if some people do not have it, perhaps it could be taken away from me. Hence the elaboration of the classic Hollywood plot in which women are investigated and found guilty of some past transgression (she lost it because she disobeyed; if I am a good boy it will not be taken away from me). In short, the mature stage is sadistic in its aggressive deployment of the investigatory gaze in its desire to find a universal female culpability.

Pricò is too young to understand sexual difference in its full adult sense (he is only four or five years old in the film), certainly, and so for him it functions as what Jean Laplanche terms an 'enigma'; adult sexuality is always more or less traumatic for children because it conditions all of their interactions with adults and yet is incomprehensible to them (Why did she pull away when I touched her there?). George Toles similarly claims that, in this film, Pricò's mother abandons him into 'the inseparable mysteries of eroticism and death' (Toles 2000: 113). This traumatic, enigmatic dimension is elevated by De Sica and Zavattini into a radical trauma, however, which has two principal characteristics: first, it cripples the subject at every stage of life, from Pricò's childhood to Umberto D's old age; second, it is a specifically *male* trauma – only the male characters, in ways great (suicide) and small (the denial of recognition from a little boy), suffer. The corollary to this second characteristic (the trauma of adult sexuality is a male trauma) is, of course, that it is always woman's fault.

So far, this would seem to accord very nicely with the 'mature' form of the recognition of sexual difference, the one that sadistically investigates and then assigns blame to woman. One would be tempted, naturally, to assign this instinct extradiegetically, to the adults who stand outside the fiction, namely De Sica and Zavattini. It is certainly true that De Sica and Zavattini imagined, over and over again, the world of childhood being ruined by some kind of cataclysmic rupture, an event after which life is unimaginable. In later, declaredly neorealist works, this traumatic rupture is something like 'history', or is, at least, the everyday, ordinary workings of history – a bicycle is stolen, an old man is evicted. If *The Children Are Watching Us* is, in fact, proto-neorealism, an *urtext* or primal scene of neorealism, we

may be able to understand those later, 'historical' ruptures quite differently. In fact, a quick tour of many of the foundational texts of neorealism indicates that the traumatic rupture is the discovery of adult sexuality (as in *Germania anno zero/Germany Year Zero* (Rossellini, 1949), where the young male protagonist is seduced by a girl barely older than he is – he commits suicide afterwards), or the traumatic consequences of adult sexuality (Marcello in *Open City* is left an orphan when his mother, Pina, pregnant out of wedlock, foolishly dashes into the street after her lover, Francesco, is taken prisoner by the Nazis, who then gun down Pina – the radical pointlessness of this death is emphasized in the next scene in which Francesco is almost immediately liberated by partisans; I've already mentioned the eviction of Umberto D in order to facilitate his landlady's marriage). Lucia Re has convincingly argued that this is the foundational gesture of literary neorealism as well, demonstrating that the beginning of history in Calvino's *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* is predicated on the murder of the protagonist's sister, a prostitute to the occupying Germans (Re 1990: 256–319); this gesture is repeated in Rossellini's *Paisà*, of course: the foundational moment of the film is the radically pointless death of the Sicilian girl in the first vignette. The girl is then (unjustly) declared by the American soldiers as a collaborator. In short, the rupture of history in neorealism is 'caused' by a woman. That causation is purely psychological, however: it consists not so much in the woman doing something wrong as in guilt being attributed to her at the level of structure rather than content.

The remarkable thing about this neorealist masterplot is that it does not merely appear as the workings of the 'mature' directors or scriptwriters, however. In *Open City*, when the young boy Marcello returns from a night-time raid on the Germans, a girl asks him why she cannot participate in these partisan heroics. Marcello is not quite sure, but he suggests that girls 'can't be heroes' (*non possono fare l'eroismo*), and then quotes the leader of the group, Romoletto, who is on the verge of adolescence. 'Women are always trouble' (*le donne son sempre guai*), a typical expression of casual misogyny. This certainly sounds like a boy merely citing without understanding, an example of how Laplanche's enigma functions linguistically as well. This is precisely how Pin, the boy protagonist of Calvino's neorealist novel, attains a kind of simulacrum of mastery over adult sexuality; he knows all the appropriate moments to say 'and your mother, too', but has absolutely no idea what the phrase itself means. *The Children Are Watching Us* projects this same adult misogyny into the infantile unconscious. How so?

A woman is being beaten

Certain structures seem to demand psychoanalysis, what I have called elsewhere the 'psychoanalytic stance'. Perhaps the clearest example of such a structure is what Freud termed 'negation'. In his essay on negation, Freud described a patient who recounted to him a dream in which a female figure appeared. 'And in your dream', Freud asked his patient, 'who was this female figure?' 'Not my mother!' the patient replied hastily (Freud

1925: 235). Undergraduates laugh when I tell this story – they recognize immediately, intuitively, that the discrepancy between the question asked and the answer given indicate the presence of an ‘other scene’. Something has distorted the patient’s speech, and introduced an excess, the word ‘not’. Some Freudian slips are debatable (perhaps it was simply a mistake when I said ‘orgasm’ instead of ‘organism’), but negation is not precisely an error – there is, if you like, ‘too much information’ in the response to the question, an excess that seems comprehensible only if we invoke a psychoanalytic stance.

After Pricò’s mother has left, the father takes Pricò to the countryside to live with the grandmother. The grandmother seems bitter and harsh, but she principally wants to be ‘left in peace’. The real problem is the serving girl, Paolina, to whom Pricò’s care is largely entrusted. But the first we see of Paolina is literally nothing, her absence – instead of taking care of the boy, she is gone. And after the scene with the seamstresses, the audience has little reason to wonder why. When she arrives, she explains that she had been to the pharmacy (it will later turn out that she is carrying on an affair with the pharmacist). We see repeated scenes of her brusquely taking care of Pricò, trying to get him into bed and asleep as quickly as possible (a particularly affecting moment involves Pricò, deprived of his mother’s reassuring presence, asking for a kiss goodnight – ‘if I give you a kiss, will you go right to sleep?’ asks Paolina anxiously). The moment she believes him asleep, she slips off her maid’s dress to reveal an evening dress, suitable for her date with the pharmacist, and she leaves Pricò unattended to go to her rendezvous.

Pricò is not asleep, however, and follows her outside, where she descends a flight of stairs to where the pharmacist awaits. Pricò leans over the wall to watch the couple below as they embrace, and in leaning over, knocks a flowerpot off the ledge – it falls and strikes Paolina on the head. Naturally, this sequence is used for comic relief; the audience can have nothing but contempt for Paolina at this point (De Sica chose Zaira La Fratta, the same actress who had so successfully played the odious Alice in his *Teresa Venerdì*, to play Paolina), and it is a relief to see her get her just desserts, even if Pricò ends up paying the price: he is kicked out by his grandmother. As his father takes Pricò home on the train, he notices the boy is feverish. He asks him: ‘Do you feel ill, my child? Are you cold?’ Pricò replies: ‘I didn’t want to hurt Paolina’.

Now, nothing could be a more clear instance of Freudian negation than this. If we follow Freud’s advice and simply remove the word ‘not’, what Pricò is saying is ‘I *did* want to hurt Paolina’. And how could he not? After all, the entire sequence with Paolina is nothing but a traumatic repetition of an earlier trauma, his mother’s abandonment of him and his father for a lover. This is clear, of course, to the adult viewer, and clear to Pricò as well, at least on an unconscious level. For he turns slowly and feverishly to look out of the window, and thus the ‘fever montage’ I mentioned earlier begins. A series of images – clearly Pricò’s feverish hallucinations – play out across

the window, now a screen. Not surprisingly, the first image is that of a flowerpot falling off a ledge. We might note that the visual representation of the flowerpot corresponds exactly to the impersonal, third-person structure Freud discussed elsewhere in the famous essay 'A Child Is Being Beaten' (Freud 1919: 175–204). Here, a flowerpot is falling. It is not falling on anyone, nor is there anyone pushing it. The conjunction of the depersonalized, agency-free flowerpot and Pricò's earlier negation ('I didn't want to hurt Paolina') leaves no doubt that the unconscious is speaking, precisely in the way that Freud's famous patient could only speak of himself in a vague, depersonalized third person: 'A Child Is Being Beaten'. The source of unconscious resistance here is, just as with Freud, a desire to avoid just who is punishing whom – only this time, Pricò is attempting to misrecognize his hostility towards his mother. In short, the phrase 'I didn't want to hurt Paolina' means 'I wanted to hurt my mother'.

This misrecognition is revealed as such during the 'fever montage'. The first two sets of images are, first, the falling flowerpot and, second, a recollection of the puppet show at the park. Of course, the first effect is to link the two scenes through visual metonymy, to mark the second (the puppet show) as the primal scene lying underneath the first (the flowerpot). In short, the fever montage is, as we would expect, obeying the logic of dreams, revealing in a coded and surreal way, a psychoanalytic truth that stands underneath everyday life, minor accidents like the dropping of a flowerpot. The linkage of the two scenes, of course, indicates that Pricò pushing the flowerpot onto Paolina's head is not only not an accident, but has a precise motivation: it is revenge for what his mother did to him. This desire to inflict harm on the mother is literally unspeakable, not something Pricò can consciously admit to, but it urgently needs to be said, and so emerges somatically, through a kind of bodily error, leaning too far off a ledge and knocking over a flowerpot.

The puppet show really is the primal scene in this film, in the most literal sense possible of the phrase. It is, of course, the most literal *scene* in the beginning of the film, a theatrical scene staged as such, and primal both insofar as it precedes almost every other scene in the movie and in being an elementary version of the scenario that drives the plot: two men and a woman. In the brief pieces we see and hear, a man declares his love for a certain Gabriella – this puppet is dressed in white and wears a black mask (because his appearance is *prior* to that of the other puppet, we may assume that he is Pricò's father and that the other is 'newcomer' or 'inter-loper'). His rival arrives, dressed in a chequered coat, and declares that since they both love her one of them must die; he provides swords, and they duel. The rival is defeated, and Gabriella arrives to praise her love, and they dance a tarantella to celebrate. What is key is that when Pricò 'recalls' this puppet show during the fever montage, he sees a scene that never took place. In the actual puppet show, the two rivals and the woman never share the stage; in his hallucination, all three are on the stage together. Much more tellingly, however, the puppet dressed in white takes

his sword and violently beats *both* the rival and the woman, as the woman frantically screams. In short, a woman is being beaten – the father beats (triumphs over) his rival, and triumphs, but also beats the mother, corporal punishment for her transgression. Both of these are of course fantasies – in reality, the rival “beats” the father (by successfully winning back Nina), and the father never beats the mother – and it is perhaps here we understand why this scene evokes *The Wizard of Oz*, another film about a child who dreams up an escapist fantasy to compensate for an improper or insufficient family. As I mentioned before, not only does the entire fever montage evoke Dorothy’s half-unconscious hallucination, but one particular shot in the fever montage appears to ‘quote’ directly from *Oz*: Pricò imagines the father and mother puppets happily dancing a tarantella together to the the same music that appears in the matching dream sequence in *The Wizard of Oz*. This may be more than a kind of analogy (just as Dorothy imagines a fantasy world to compensate for her dreary and miserable childhood, so Pricò imagines a happy consonance between his parents) – as I mentioned before, one of the key issues in *The Children Are Watching Us* is recognition: the film yearns to avoid a full recognition of adult sexuality. Recognition is fundamental to the *Wizard of Oz*, as well, from Dorothy’s inability to be recognized by adults (hence a series of figures in her dream/hallucination who explicitly *recognize* her) to the film’s own desire to misrecognize sexual difference and adult female sexuality (Judy Garland’s famously taped and flattened breasts).

De Sica’s film’s hostility towards the mother finds its culminating moment precisely in a gesture of denied recognition. Pricò’s father places him in a church-run boarding school. He must, of course, have a proper school uniform, and the scene of the uniform-fitting clearly functions in opposition to the earlier sequence of Pricò among the women making lingerie. This is a store run by men that specializes in school uniforms for little boys – unlike the earlier, ‘feminine’ setting, this store features a series of mannequins that all have heads and faces, complete bodies, suggesting both a kind of completeness as well as inviting identification in a way in which the equally idealized feminine body parts did not. Indeed, the first shot we see of the store is that of a full-body mannequin that looks deceptively like a live child – on a first screening, most of my students initially believed that it was a shot of Pricò standing still. The key is that these images are all suggestive of the boy as a ‘little man’, an identity which we might expect Pricò to feel quite ambivalent about (all of the outfits we see in the story are semi-military, from sailor suits to a man-sized mannequin of an adventurer on safari, pith helmet and all). Still, Pricò needs a kind of sartorial egoic support, as his incomplete uniform suggests a kind of corporal and psychic incompleteness. Despite encouragement from the sales staff, Pricò remains in doubt about this uniform, which appears to transform him into a juvenile version of an adult, and no wonder given the suit’s evident incompleteness next to the initial shot of the perfectly attired mannequin. De Sica claimed (without irony) that Pricò was his first

success at making the audience fully feel for the first time 'la creatura umana, mentre tutti i miei personaggi precedenti avevano qualcosa di manichino' [the human creature, while all of my previous characters had something mannequin-like about them] (Brunetta 2004: 200). And yet here, the mannequin is precisely what is more real, more fleshed out, more complete, than the child.

His father arrives to reassure him by trying on the hat himself; the effect, of course, is precisely one of infantilization, the man as a child. Nonetheless, this development holds out the promise not only of a kind of male bonding, but also of a kind of postponed but potential wholeness – Pricò's suit is incomplete, of course, missing an arm and with unfinished stitching, but in a way that activates precisely the principal *méconnaissance* of the mirror stage: that other image might be me. It is only when Pricò sees his father wearing the hat, presenting himself, in other words, as the *imago* that Pricò is to assume, that he accepts the new suit of clothes. This is the image that he can recognize as himself, in other words (even if it is, strictly speaking, a misrecognition) (see Lacan 2007: 75–81). But this image is also the fantasy of De Sica's film: the man who is still a boy. Pricò's smile, then, is precisely the 'jubilation' that Lacan refers to when the child sees its specular image and perceives it as complete, independent, more than what it is. It is worth noting that the hat is still at this point one of the classic symbols of male authority, especially in the pseudo-military version in which it appears here – but it would also be a mistake to think that De Sica is dreaming of a world in which men are invested with their proper symbolic authority. Rather, he seems to be dreaming of a world that would remain unmarred by sexual difference, in which boys never precisely 'grow up', but merely get larger. This is the image that Pricò elects to recognize in the mirror.

What Pricò will not recognize is, of course, his mother. It should be clear that the problem is not that she is a woman *per se*, but that she has gone over to the other side, the side of the fully adult marked by sexual difference – this is why Pricò's earlier refusal to recognize his mother's lover, or the Commendatore, is especially important. It comes as no surprise, however, that this disavowal, this deliberate refusal to recognize adult sexuality, is marked by a notable asymmetry. The narrative frames the Commendatore or Roberto as outsiders, strangers with no evident attachments or families, while the dramatic *choices* of the film (to betray or not betray her husband, to abandon or not abandon her child) all rest on the mother. In short, woman is made to bear the burden of adult sexuality – it is 'her fault'. Pricò, his father and even the lover Roberto, all amount to spectators who must wait and see what she will decide. And so, in the film's final sequence, Pricò has been left in a Catholic boarding school and has just been informed of his father's suicide (in keeping with fascist cultural codes, it is only referred to as a 'disgrazia' or 'misfortune'). His mother arrives, but Pricò, crushed by the loss of his father, his specular future self, will not look at her – will not recognize her. He turns instead to his newly adopted father figure, an old priest. This figure is of course doubly excepted from

- 4 In an intriguing article on *The Children Are Watching Us* and Michael Haneke's *Caché*, Giuseppina Mecchia makes the point that historical narratives focalized through suffering children can have an uncanny effect that disrupts the formation of either cynical or transcendental views of that history – this may be true in *Caché*, but in the case of De Sica's neorealism, the cynicism about women's role in history (both the personal history of the male child in his films and the larger history of the Resistance) is all the more dangerous for being invisible (Mecchia, 'The Children Are Still Watching Us', 2007, pp. 131–41).

the realm of adult sexuality, both because of his age and because of his priestly vocation.

The fantasy of contingency

Neorealist cinema knows perfectly well that this recognition of adult female sexuality is inevitable – indeed, the tragic histories that neorealism depends on repeatedly mark the shift of woman as a maternal nurturer to woman as a wife or lover (perhaps best exemplified when *Open City*'s Pina leaves her son to run after her fiancé and is gunned down by the Germans for her troubles) at the turning point of history. This is when things go wrong, when the young male subject is marked for life. At the same time, neorealism adopts a variety of strategies in its attempts to maintain the fantasy that it *might not have* happened. The touching friendship between Umberto and the barely pubescent maid in *Umberto D* might not have been ruined had she not turned out to be pregnant (not only out of wedlock, but – belying her appearance of extreme youth and innocence – she is unsure which of two soldiers is the father); Umberto's landlady might not have found a husband and decided to evict her elderly tenant. These are predicated as chance events, often presented with the melodramatic temporality that Linda Williams identifies in 'Film Bodies' – melodrama is structured by the time of 'too late' (Williams 1991: 2–13). Antonio Ricci fails to steal a bicycle only because he waits too long, the soccer match lets out and the street is flooded with witnesses and people who can stop him from riding off, just as Bruno arrives at the bus 'too late' and so witnesses his father's humiliation. The utopian community of the poor in *Miracle in Milan* might not have been disturbed by the accidental discovery of oil in the middle of their shanty town; the various episodes in *Paisà* are almost all based on misunderstandings or missed appointments; and the plot of Luchino Visconti's *La terra trema* (1948) (as well as the novel it was based on, Verga's *I Malavoglia*) turns on an unpredictable accident and other chance events. My point here is that in each individual case, it always appears to be a mere contingent chance, something that *could have been* otherwise. But what does one call, in strictly philosophical terms, using the language of modal logic, a contingency that is the same in every possible universe? A necessity, of course. It always appears as contingent, but it nonetheless *always* appears. It is a kind of absurdity, a 'necessary contingency'.⁴ This is perhaps the chief difficulty with Kinder's notion of the 'pseudo-iterative' – while it is easy to notice the (progressive) ideological value of the events that are foregrounded in neorealism (the problems of elderly pensioners, the suffering of the jobless), those seemingly invisible background events may have precisely the same iterative function.

In the case of De Sica, at least, we are left with a series of hypothetical regrets (which generally make woman bear the burden of guilt): if only she hadn't ...; if only mamma weren't ... and so on, then we could have had it all, a seamless universe without this traumatic, enigmatic split. The only place, however, where we can have this kind of world unstained by adult

sexuality, or where we can preserve our fantasy of it, is precisely in cinema. And here we see De Sica's other fetish – cinema is on the one hand condemned as the image of adult sexuality (the *Gilda* posters in *Bicycle Thief*, the Cinema Iride, the 'Iris Cinema', in *Umberto D*) and on the other hand maintained as the refuge of the 'place that could have been', where Nina *could have* taken Pricò, the photograph of the happy family that *might not have been* spoiled. This fetishistic fantasy, the dream of cinema unspoiled by adult sexuality, a space where the young boy could have enjoyed his parents' undivided love and attention, is a foundational fantasy in De Sica's film, but also in neorealism more broadly – a movement that, at first glance, would not appear to be centrally concerned with either.

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Of bikes and Men: The intersection of three narratives in Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette*

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Abstract

'Of Bikes and Men' explores the intersections of three (and the same) narratives within De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), one of the masterpieces of Italian neorealism. It interprets *Bicycle Thieves* as a quest narrative with a picaresque slant (one flexible enough to accommodate diverse quest narrative such as Dante's *Comedy* or Cervantes' *Quixote*) and reveals the existence within the film of a Marxist narrative of alienation, whereby the bicycle follows the Marxist trajectory from object to commodity, and a Freudian tale of fetishism, within which the irretrievable bike, obsessively sought in the repetition of dismembered bike-parts, stands for the irretrievable maternal phallus. The three narratives intersect on a bridge, the locus classicus of the quest narrative, testifying to the ambiguity and indecidability of the message of *Bicycle Thieves*.

Keywords

De Sica
Bicycle Thieves
neorealism
picaresque novel
alienation
fetishism

André Bazin's reading of De Sica's and Zavattini's *Ladri di biciclette*/*Bicycle Thieves* has inextricably linked the film with two much debated labels: 'pure cinema' (1971: 60) and 'the only valid Communist film' (1971: 51) of its decade.¹ Departing from Bazin's analysis of the film as a perfect example of neorealism that verges on 'no cinema', more recent criticism has strived to unveil the artificial quality of *Bicycle Thieves*, which appears now as a refined construction from both narrative and visual points of view; to downplay the revolutionary aspects in the political reading and to bring to light a consistent psychoanalytical subtext in the film.² In contrast to the monadic, 'uncinematic' purity and essentiality hailed by earlier critics, it is the film's complex interrelation of micro-systems and the dense stratification of narratives that, according to contemporary readings, constitute the success of De Sica's masterpiece.³ In particular, studies such as those of Marcus, Thompson, Moneti, Alonge, Wagstaff and Gordon show how Zavattini and De Sica masterfully handled the techniques of realism, as well as of expressionist and symbolic techniques in both scriptwriting and directing, and expose the narrative and visual ambiguities of the film. This essay takes this critical trend further and aims to show how the 'undecidability' of *Bicycle Thieves* is inherent to the film's narrative pattern – a modern

- 1 For Bazin's position on De Sica see also 'De Sica: metteur en scene,' in Bazin (1971: 61–78).
- 2 An important step in the reassessment of Bazin's criticism of De Sica is the 1975 issue of *Bianco e nero* edited by Caldirola, dedicated to the director.
- 3 See Alonge (1997: 13) and Moneti (1992: 254).

- 4 On the film's relationship with Bartolini's book see Pintus (1992: 137–54); Fofi (1992: 155–60); Haraguci (2000: 109–25); Moneti (1992: 247–52), and Gordon (2008: 22–33).
- 5 As the discourses of sexual and commodity fetishism overlap both rhetorically and ideologically, the Marxist and Freudian theories of the fetish have become a unified and much studied module in contemporary theory, fruitfully applied to cinema studies (although not, to my knowledge, to *Bicycle Thieves* or to the Italian neorealist film), particularly in the wake of Laura Mulvey's work on 'visual pleasure' and fetishism. See Mulvey (1975: 6–18, 1996: 1–15). Inspiration for the reading of *Bicycle Thieves* in terms of the Marx and Freud module came to me from the work and teaching of Barbara Spackman.
- 6 The complexities and artificial elements of the plot are discussed by Tomasulo (2000: 163), Thompson (1988), Moneti (1992), Alonge (1997: 54–64) and Gordon (2008: 31–36).

embodiment of the ancient and metamorphic theme of the quest, which incorporates political and gender implications.

De Sica's and Zavattini's film was loosely inspired by Luigi Bartolini's novel (a fact that, though well known, seems to be easily neglected by many viewers and critics of the film), the title being perhaps the most significant loan. Rather than exploring the already exhausted vein of the small similarities and enormous differences between the two texts, this essay focuses on a narrative/literary pattern that might have been transferred from book to film: the model of the quest in a picaresque version.⁴ The literary model solicits and engenders two other readings – a Marxist narrative of alienation and a psychoanalytical tale of fetishism.⁵ Thus, the film's central object functions simultaneously in three different texts: the bicycle, the elusive goal of the picaresque quest, follows step by step the process that leads from object to commodity in the Marxist text and achieves the vanishing status of fetish in the Freudian reading.

Common to the three narratives that this essay will set out is the creation and enforcement of an illusory belief – whether it is the magic attached to the object of a quest, the mystery of money in a capitalistic society or the phantasmatic status of the phallus. My argument is that this triple thrust of ambiguity affects the film visually and narratively and exposes the hollowness of reality within the very fabric of realism. The delusional sense of magic and wonder inherent in the three narratives disintegrates the focus of the film. The bicycle cannot be found because it has been invested with magic – and other significant objects and roles are drawn into this figment as well. This outcome is visual as well as narrative: in key moments of the film spectators are led to think that they are focusing on significant objects (Maria's linens, Antonio's bike) or roles (father, son), but at the same time, it is suggested that they might be just a *trompe l'oeil*.

The quest

Rather than providing a snapshot of reality, a script of 'accidental nature' that preserves the 'phenomenological integrity' of the events, as Bazin interpreted it (1971: 51–52), *Bicycles Thieves* is now acknowledged to feature a complex and well-organized plot. It has been observed that the film is replete with improbable events (finding the thief 'by chance', for example), internal cross-references (the double visit to the fortune teller, and the episode in which Antonio leaves the bicycle almost unattended under the custody of children, which is a prefiguration of the theft), metaphors (the window shutter, which 'shuts down' Antonio's hopes for a better future is an often mentioned example) and climaxes (especially the final scene). In short, it displays all the apparatus of a complex narrative.⁶

As Giorgio Barberi Squarotti first suggested, the plot of *Bicycle Thieves* adheres to canonical rules and devices such as those of the *quête*, a narrative as old as literature itself. The film is therefore 'symbolic' rather than 'realistic' (Squarotti 1975: 106–07). From this perspective, it is easy to

detect in *Bicycle Thieves* the simple rules that structure, say, a medieval quest narrative: an object is lost, two heroes venture in an often cyclical journey to retrieve it and go through a number of adventurous and well-constructed steps involving magic, love, fear, death etc. The *Graal*, which stands out amongst the tradition for the peculiarity of the non-retrieved object, comes to mind as a comparison to the non-retrieved ([0]and non-retrievable) bicycle.

As opposed to a traditional type of quest, however, *Bicycle Thieves* has an open plot, wherein the adventure becomes more important than the goal. De Sica described the literary source of the film, Luigi Bartolini's *Bicycles Thieves* (which has been so transformed by Zavattini's script as to make it unrecognizable beyond the title), as a 'festive, colourful, picaresque text' (Pintus 1992: 141–42). Although the two first adjectives may not apply to the gloomy and desolate atmosphere of the film, the third easily does. Even more than the book (in which the thought of stealing a bicycle only crosses the protagonist's mind), the film indeed almost punctually develops the central narrative thread of the picaresque genre: the open-ended adventure of an innocent-turned-criminal. In the standard description of the typical features of this hybrid genre, developed in sixteenth-century Spain, we find many definitions that fit the plot and the heroes of *Bicycle Thieves*.⁷ The picaresque is the novel of the poor, episodic in structure, made of open-ended, voyage-like narratives, where a hostile social milieu forces the central character to evolve and adapt often by means of cleverness. Although the romance plot appears to be governed by a super-order that makes the story meaningful in the end, the 'chaos of life' is the leader of the picaresque plot. In the process, innocence is often corrupted, yet values are discovered anew: a fitting description for *Bicycle Thieves*' last couple of sequences, where Antonio's loss of innocence is matched by the gain of family bond.

The flexible and open nature of the adventure and the polysemic quality of the quest's central object make the plot of the film a prism that reflects into several and disparate narratives. Part *Odyssey* in a twisted Rome, where Homeric gods impart storms and suns, monsters and benign helpers, part *(Un)Divine Comedy*, a journey without guides in a sorrowful city of men, beginning with an objectified *Fides* and ending with an allusion to a more spiritual faith,⁸ this narrative also shows the lightness, intrigue and malice of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*.⁹ Every quest narrative is also a *Bildungsroman*, and *Bicycle Thieves* is no different: we see little Bruno coming of age in the streets and the reversal of the father/son roles.¹⁰ Most notably, however, the quest of the protagonists of *Bicycles Thieves* is a Quixotic experience. The delusional evaluation of the object of the quest and the isolation of the two heroes with respect to the society surrounding them, which appears mostly preoccupied by different, more concrete problems than finding a stolen bicycle in Rome, make of Antonio and Bruno a Don Quixote–Sancho Panza type of duo. Like the barber's basin interpreted by Quixote as Mambriano's helmet, the over-invested bicycle isolates Antonio and Bruno almost in a halo of madness, creating at times ironic undertones. In accordance with the

7 For an overview of the notions of picaresque, picaresque, the picaresque novel, see Dunn (1979), Rico (1984), Guillen (1987) and Bjornson (1977).

8 The comparison between the plot of *Bicycle Thieves* and the search for faith in Dante's *Divine Comedy* can be traced to Bondanella (1999: 59–61), who notices that the quest takes place from Friday to Sunday and that the bicycle is named, symptomatically, 'Fides.' Alonge reads 'Fides' as 'trust' as opposed to 'faith,' thereby interpreting the bicycle as the 'magic object' that allows for social mobility (1997: 89).

9 See for instance Marcus' comment on the Porta Portese sequence: 'In the scene following the downpour at Porta Portese, Rome becomes a setting worthy of Ariosto, where hidden secrets and dangers seem to lurk around every corner and shadowy presences materialize in the raincleansed air' (1986: 73).

10 On Bruno's *Bildungsroman* see Alonge (1997: 67–85).

- 11 According to De Sica, a common event like the theft of a bicycle may become 'important', 'tragic', even 'catastrophic'. Realism is, then, nothing else but the recording of the 'extraordinary adventures' hidden in the real anguish of everyday facts. See Caldiron (1975: 258–59). On the mapping of *Bicycle Thieves*' Rome, see Gordon (2008: 62–81).
- 12 La Polla shows how carefully De Sica constructs Ricci's isolation against the background of the city merciless architecture (1975: 66–83).
- 13 Translations are taken from Hartog (1968). Marcus (1986: 57–58) interprets this episode (as well as the detail of Ricci posting the advertisement for Gilda, for which see later in this essay) as De Sica's rejection of commercial cinema.

picaresque genre, the initially innocent character is perverted and led to crime by society and by often unpredictable turns of events.

In accordance with De Sica's attempt to capture 'the dramatic dimension of everyday life', 'the wonder which inheres within domestic news stories',¹¹ the quest narrative in *Bicycle Thieves* is divested of its adventurous grandeur, yet its essential structure – neatly organized *loci* of drama and wonder, of animosity and alliance, of magic and menace – remains evident, as it is reflected in the mirror of the poverty and deprivation of post-war Italy.

Bicycle Thieves was primarily shot in outdoor settings and at real locations in Rome. Yet the urban landscape, heavily manipulated by the camera, turns fantastic and fairy tale-like on several occasions, transforming along with the characters' actions and psychological development. As Alonge has pointed out, Roman locations are turned by the film into menacing and dark corners, serving as allegories of the characters' anguish (1997: 50–53).¹² The movement between places, in accordance with the rules of a quest narrative, appears necessarily inconsistent and illogical. (The hero does not go anywhere; rather, the quest brings him places.) This strategy is beautifully inscribed in the film through the recurring wrong turns taken by the two truly wandering characters, and even by the incoherent bodily movements of the actors, allegedly 'realistic' touches.

The father-and-son pair alternates between accidental movements and well-defined stops, stations along the archetypal narrative that they follow: the cyclical episode of the fortune teller; the vertiginous pawn shop; the hellish police station, where Antonio/Quixote is derided as a fool; the bicycle market, a true urban 'dark wood' in which the heroes are affected by utter confusion; the carnivalesque moment at church; the forgetful stop at the restaurant; the whorehouse.

Although the first part of the film holds to a quite orderly narrative (seq. 1–20: acquisition of the new job, retrieval of the bicycle, theft, attempted retrieval at the first market), somewhere between the two bicycle-market episodes the plot becomes more and more episodic and the two knights give the impression that they are journeying through the city more for the sake of travelling than to attain a goal. Maybe not coincidentally the transition between the two market episodes is the odd, ironic (and slightly naïve) meta-cinematic moment, where the driver of the garbage truck complains about the weather: it always rains on Sundays, and the movies are not an alternative ('what can you do in this weather? Go the cinema? That means nothing to me, absolutely nothing!').¹³ This odd episode (the reflection on cinema is abruptly interrupted by a near-accident) marks the midway of the journey, where the plot starts dissolving into side-adventures such as that of the drowned boy, believed by Antonio to be his son, or that of the restaurant sequence, a Calypso-like moment of oblivion, marked by entertainment, food and drunkenness.

The bicycle market is one of the key scenes in the film, comparable to a 'dark wood' kind of station in the traditional quest narrative, a place of utter disorientation and error, and marks the swerve towards a more

picaresque plot. The market episode is two-fold. In the scenes set at Piazza Vittorio, the characters' confusion and desperation is established through a quite conventional narrative, and visually by means of an orderly progression of alternate shots (concerned faces versus unforgiving bicycle parts). In the part set out at Porta Portese, however, the atmosphere turns truly picaresque: sudden rain descends; characters and bicycles storm in and out of the frame while Antonio and Bruno stand in the middle, almost paralysed before finding refuge against the wall, only to then be cornered by the 'absurd' group of German seminarists; then the sun reappears and with it vendors and bicycles return, again in a chaotic fashion; finally the thief appears, quite 'unrealistically'. As Guglielmo Moneti's close reading of this sequence reveals, the narrative commotion is underlined by complex, non-descriptive camera movements (1992: 259–61). From this point on Antonio and Bruno seem to acknowledge the hostility of society and resort to sustain themselves by means of violence, cleverness (applied, for instance, in the episode of the beggar) and even theft.

In the quête of *Bicycle Thieves*, a single linear tale of loss and attempted retrieval is depicted from several angles and interpreted in different tonalities, from the dramatic to the ironic. The otherwise ordinary story thereby takes on a sense of wonder, and the everyday bicycle is transformed into a magical object with meanings and implications far beyond its concrete existence. In its very irretrievability, however, other narratives of loss and impossible quest are inscribed.

Alienation

The extent of the social critique and Marxist message in *Bicycles Thieves* has been much debated since the film's release. 'Is this a communist film, or not?' was the question that vexed many early spectators, critics and journalists. Typical of the initial politicized attitude towards the film is the often quoted remark of Sergio Amidei, who abandoned the production of the film claiming that it was 'unrealistic' that the communist community could have left a worker, a 'compagno', alone without help in such circumstances (Alonge 1997: 18). Although hailing *Bicycle Thieves* as 'the only valid Communist film of the past decade', Bazin elsewhere praises the ideological ambiguity of the film: 'The ambiguities of *Miracle in Milan* and *Bicycle Thieves* have been used by the Christian Democrats and by the Communists. So much the better: a true parable should have something for everyone'. According to Bazin, however, this ideological ambiguity is still a mark of neorealism, as it is fostered by the 'love' that inspired the director's gaze towards human kind (1971: 51, 70–71). The later acknowledgement of the ambiguous ideology that inevitably pervades Neorealist cinema prompted critics to restate the question in subtler terms (what social and political scenario(es) does this film construct?) and to look within the seams of the film for (more or less conscious) revolutionary and/or conservative traces.¹⁴

Alienation – both social and metaphysical – is a term that frequently recurs in descriptions of the desperate and dehumanizing quality of

- 14 For other political reactions to *Bicycle Thieves*, see Pellizzari (1992: 168–69) and Alonge (1997: 20). For the recognition of a reactionary, as opposed to revolutionary, ideology in the film see Cannistraro (1975: 14–19) and Tomasulo (2000). For a different analysis of the economic narrative of the bike, see Gordon (2008: 37–61).

Antonio Ricci's quest for his bicycle. It also suggests the inscription and narrativization within the film of the core Marxist critique of capitalism: the alienation of labour from the labourer, which is a consequence of the process that transforms an object into a commodity.

In the first chapter of Marx's *Capital* it is stated that any useful object – that which 'satisfies human needs of whatever kind' (where usefulness is connected to its physical properties and realized in use and consumption) – is initially endowed with use value and strongly connected to the labour that produced it (1990: 125). Soon, however, the qualitative use value is turned into the quantitative evaluation of exchange value (for example, 20 yards of linen = one coat), which results in the object's official transformation into a commodity (1990: 139). When different commodities enter into the discourse of exchange, different, concrete kinds of labours too – the labour that weaves flax into linen and tailors linen into a coat – lose their qualitative aspect and are configured into a quantitative notion. Thus, the value of labour is objectified and attached to the commodity it creates.

When compared within larger sequences (the 'expanded form of value:' 20 yards of linen = 1 coat or = 10 lb. tea = 40 lb. coffee etc.), the relations between commodities appear less and less accidental: mirrored onto the other, they only exist and have meaning through their mutual relationships, through the notion of a 'universal equivalent', which in its most highly evolved and abstracted form, is currency (1990: 154–58). Money, then, is the 'magic', the mysterious entity that has only equivalent value. The initial object, which is 'obvious', or even 'trivial', in its straightforward relation to use value, becomes 'mysterious' when turned into a commodity – its enigma consisting in the objectification of the worker's labour to the product itself. Marx refers to this substitution as 'fetishism' (1990: 164–65). By turning value into an inherent feature of the commodity, capitalism undermines the significance of human labour and objectifies it, thus supporting itself through the incessant reproduction and proliferation of commodities and objectified labour.

In the first half of *Bicycle Thieves*, Antonio's bicycle follows almost step by step the process that leads from object to commodity. Initially, the bicycle is connected to its use value, as it stands for Ricci's potentiality for labour, the *sine qua non* for his employment. This is signalled by the character's desperation at having pawned it: 'I've got a job but I can't take it' he bursts at his wife after returning from the unemployment office. We also learn that the bicycle was involved in the simplest form of exchange: it was pawned for food ('and how else could we have eaten?'). At the unemployment office, however, an early sign of the commodified context of the narrative is given when we learn that Ricci and his bicycle are not unique but indeed exchangeable for any other worker–bicycle pair. Ricci's emergence from the anonymous crowd of unemployed workers, heavily underscored in the visual narrative, is threatened not only by the fact that he does not have a bicycle at hand, but also because the other workers do, and they are ready to jump at Antonio's failure: 'hey . . . I have got a bike' says one; 'you are not

the only one. I've got one too' answers another. 'I've got one too' echoes the crowd, menacingly surrounding Antonio and threatening to suck him in – a prophecy that is fulfilled in the last sequence of the film.¹⁵

Through his wife's sacrifice (a two-fold sacrifice, indeed: that of her dowry linens and of herself, who, as a character, shortly disappears from the film's narrative), the quest's object is redeemed in the masterfully vertical episode of the pawn shop. Whereas the linens lose their uniqueness by being thrown carelessly on top of a huge pile of other similar linens, the bicycle is rescued from the oppressive anonymity of the pawn shop: it is a *Fides*, guarantor of the trust/faith in the family's prosperity. Indeed, it is Maria who first connects the bicycle to its exchange value by proposing the equation 'a bicycle = dowry linens'. With Maria's angry and somewhat melodramatic gesture, however, the objects are endowed solely with accidental exchange value, whereas in the pawn shop both the linens and the bicycle are inserted in an extended value form by being juxtaposed with all sorts of other objects and transactions – and most importantly, by being related to the equivalent value of money (linens = 7500 lire; bicycle = 6100). This process results in the linens and the bicycle literally crossing paths. In sequence 4, the path of the man fetching Antonio's *Fides* is crossed by a man carrying what the viewer is sequentially directed to interpret as Maria's linens – as Antonio's slightly remorseful look also leads to think. However, when the man carrying the linens starts to climb a huge rack that is filled with similar packages, the viewer realizes they could be any linens (or anything else in a package similar in size to Maria's linens, for that matter), about to be piled onto the heap of anonymous goods. In other words, it does not matter whether the package contains Maria's linens, as they now count only for their equivalent value.¹⁶

Here we experience an instance of the film's visual strategy that both establishes and disavows a belief, disintegrating the object and at the same time charging it with magic. The connection with the bicycle and Antonio's look of remorse conjure up the conviction that these are Maria's linens; the pile of anonymous parcels both reinforces the drama and suggests that the package might contain any other exchangeable linens (or no linens at all). And the viewer is left with a mixed conclusion: that these are, and are not, Maria's linens. The bicycle and the linens are hence inserted into an extended value form; they have entered the enigma of capitalism. The constriction and almost violence implied by this transition is visually rendered by the narrowness of the clerk's booth, which barely frames the face of the petitioner, so that Maria's linens can hardly be pushed through and obstruct vision: for a moment, the linens and the hands exchanging them are all the spectator sees.¹⁷

Interestingly, while the linens enter through such a narrow path, the redeemed bicycle exits, due to its dimensions, from a main door – the comparison giving the viewer a false sense of achievement and freedom. Having seemingly gained their financial and familial stability, Antonio and Maria happily pedal through the city, unaware of the fatal turn of events

15 According to Alonge, the unemployment office scene is constructed as a metaphor for social climbing, with Antonio standing on the lower steps of the stairs and gazing up at the official (1997: 59–60).

16 For a different reading of this scene, see Rocchio (1999: 55). For a shot by shot analysis, see Wagstaff (2007: 344–48).

17 For De Sica's manipulation of the viewer's emotion through the use of reverse-angle sequence in this episode, see Wagstaff's analysis of *Bicycle Thieves* (1996: 261–64).

- 18 Other interpretations include: heavily sexualized women, American cinema, American society in general. For the significance of the Hayworth poster, see West (2000: 145–46).
- 19 Interestingly, the bicycle that the thief is riding resembles the one stolen in Bartolini's book, a light and swift racing bike, and stands as a little literary charm implanted in the middle of a notably unfaithful adaptation (1984: 10–11). Less incidentally, the film's thief also resembles the book's.
- 20 It is worth noting that bicycles start becoming particularly visible in the film on the morning in which Ricci starts using, and soon loses, his own. Before seq. 9, in fact, no other bicycles but Ricci's are seen roaming the streets. Moreover, Alonge (1997: 62) notices a truly surreal detail in the stadium scene: in addition to the already overcrowded bicycles of the soccer fans who have parked outside of the stadium, a cycling competition passes through the landscape, after which Antonio decides to steal the bike.

brought on by the enigmatic process of commodity exchange – notwithstanding even the menacing signs surrounding them (the shutting of the window, the prefiguration of the theft at the fortune teller's place).

Only Bruno's voice is oracular at this point. 'Did you see what they did to it?' The little boy's remark in finding a dent on the pedal while examining the vehicle is truly ominous in this sense. The 'voice of innocence', as Bruno is at this point – still captured in a timid imitation of the father and in the happiness of having rescued the bicycle – verbalizes the 'loss of innocence' of the object/labour.

The initial object is soon lost again: it vanishes after diagonally crossing two shots in sequence 12, and all the other bicycles in sight are suddenly (and permanently) not Antonio's. Rather appropriately, the theft takes place under the tutelary eyes of Rita Hayworth, who gazes down from the poster of *Gilda* that Antonio is gluing onto the wall – a polysemic image that, among many other interpretations, can be read as an icon of American capitalism, the dubious and frightful yet inevitable future of post-war Italy.¹⁸ From this point on, the viewer witnesses the proliferation of Antonio's vehicle in millions of bicycles, and its fragmentation through multiple shots of bicycle parts, none of which is or belongs to the 'original' one.

The original bicycle seems for a moment to be retrievable at Piazza Vittorio, but the different serial number irremediably signals its loss. At Porta Portese, the thief and a/the bicycle appear, and we are once again led to interpret the object as Antonio's, as it lingers for a while in the centre of the frame, appetizing and mocking like a mirage. However, a second inspection of the shape of the thief's bicycle reveals that it is definitely not the *Fides* – another instance of the vanishing status of the central object.¹⁹

The excess of representations of bicycles in the film is abundantly evident. In addition to the key sequences at the bicycle market and the stadium, where one is truly made 'bike-sick', in all outdoor sequences after the theft there is at least one bicycle zipping through.²⁰ While this is certainly a 'realistic' portrayal of transportation in post-war Italy, it is also a constant reminder of the alienated and commodified condition of what the object stands for: human labour.

Prefigured by the vertically aligned pawn shop sequence, during which the object is first 'stained' by extended exchange value, the desperately horizontal sequence at the bicycle market further emphasizes the now even more alienated condition of the object. The attempt at 're-producing' the stolen bicycle begins with an orderly division of labour, which confines the characters into three separate but virtually analogous parts of an assembly line: Bruno with the pump and bell; Meniconi and Antonio with the tires; Bagonghi with the frame (while Baiocco, the leader of the group, promises a constructive enterprise: 'we'll have to look for it piece by piece. Then, when we have found all the bits, we'll put it together again). However, the characters are regrouped several times throughout the episode, with Baiocco and Ricci eventually also looking at the bicycle frames, as if to emphasize the meaninglessness of the entire endeavour. Shots of increasingly

concerned and lost faces are alternated with shots of bicycles and bicycle parts: not only are the workers and the commodity equated and interchangeable, but the human dimension of the workers is also annihilated in the process.

The obsessive sameness of the object here is differentiated only through brand and codes, and other markers of the capitalist system in which it exists. The *Fides*' description provided in the film - 'Fides del tipo leggero, 1935' - sounds almost magical in Bruno's mouth at the beginning of the episode, but it ends up being just one in a series and nearly useless when Antonio tries to check a frame serial number with the help of a policeman. The only magic that effectively animates the bicycle market is money, which, not surprisingly, surfaces only in the hands of what in this context can be read as the 'bourgeois threat': the man sexually harassing Bruno at the bell stand. The outfit (including the elegant white Panama) and language (Italian, in contrast to the Roman dialect) of the harasser seem to suggest that he belongs to a different class than Antonio and his companions. He is also the only one who explicitly mentions money at market, when he asks the price of the bell (150 lire), with which he is attempting to lure the boy.

Notably, the episode of Bruno's harassment is introduced by what is often perceived as an almost surreal detail: the young man blowing soap bubbles, which for a moment fill the frame. As we become more aware that the quest for the bicycle has turned into an alienated search for the irretrievable significance of human labour itself, this otherwise oddly placed image gains resonance. As labour and object become interchangeable and their value is increasingly bound to the mercilessness of money, the proliferation and fragmentation of the central object amplifies the emptiness and meaninglessness that is created by a capitalist economy.

Fetishism

The alienated quest for the bicycle/labour is also staged in *Bicycles Thieves* as the search for a traditional male role. In addition to bicycles, men also dominate the film; and in the obsessive, alienated reproduction of the 'male' some of the 'original' is lost.

Bicycles Thieves lends itself easily to psychoanalytical critique. Oedipal motifs run so clearly on the surface of the film that even cautious critics acknowledge that the film's portrayal of the crisis of the father figure – and of the adult male in general, who, as representative of the generation that consented to fascism, is the permanent target of neorealist cinema. The sexual undertones of Bruno's *Bildungsroman* (including the homosexual threat at the bicycle market and the whorehouse from which he is excluded) are also evident keys to a psychoanalytical reading.

The ratio between male and female presences speaks to the male focus of the film. After the disappearance of Maria at the beginning of the quest, a *coup* that never goes unnoticed by critics, female characters of the film are few and peripheral, merely presiding like icons over the various stages of the quest (the loud vendor, the sorrowful mother of the thief, the fortune

- 21 Despite some attempts at reevaluating the importance of women in the film, which mostly revolve around the acknowledgement of Maria as an unconventionally energetic and strong-willed female character, the fact remains that the portrayal of women in *Bicycle Thieves* is quite conventional. For the role of women in neorealist film, see Caldwell (2000: 131–46).
- 22 See Freud's 'Fetishism' (1927) and 'Medusa's Head' (1922) in Rieff (ed.) (1997: 202–09).

teller, the pious ladies in church, the prostitutes).²¹ Moreover, the crowds of Rome are exclusively male in the film (at the unemployment office, at the bicycle market, the mob around the thief's home, the football crowd) – with the exception of the small and quite segregated group of women at the fountain from which Maria emerges at the beginning of the film. The often remarked-upon distinction between the beginning (which shows Antonio standing apart from the crowd in line at the unemployment office) and the ending (which shows Antonio and Bruno being sucked into and engulfed by the football crowd) should be taken with an obvious warning: 'male crowd' – once again an all too realistic portrayal of life and activity on post-war Italian streets.

What starts out as a quest that Bruno undertakes *with* his father soon turns into a quest *for* the father, and indeed, it proceeds 'inside of' the father to expose his disempowered role. From the beginning, Bruno's potential to be father to his own father is evident. It starts with imitation, very clearly laid out in sequence 8, when Bruno and Antonio prepare for work with the same gestures: as many have noted, the son shows much more responsibility than the father, for instance in taking care of the infant sibling. It ends in substitution, in the final sequence, when Bruno both rescues and 'annihilates' his father.

Furthermore, the bicycle clearly stands for Antonio's masculinity. In the short period before it is stolen, the bicycle evokes not only prosperity but also stability for the family structure, with the precarious patriarch now admired by his son and his wife. With the loss of the bicycle, however, this stable system of male dominance and virility disintegrates. The polysemic image of Rita Hayworth presiding over the theft works equally well in the psychoanalytical narrative, as the heavily sexualized woman who threatens virility. In a straightforward Freudian reading, the bicycle is the phallus, and Antonio's virility is threatened by castration. According to Freud, this fear originates very early in a little boy's psychoanalytical life and is triggered by the traumatic vision of female diversity and 'imperfection' with respect to an imagined, 'whole' original ('It happened to her; it can happen to me . . .').

However, the psychoanalytical quest of *Bicycle Thieves* holds to the strategies of a particular, 'deviated' outcome of male sexuality: fetishism. Instead of acknowledging and overcoming the fear of castration, a fetishist fights it by simultaneously acknowledging and denying the existence of an 'original' (maternal) phallus and substituting it with objects that very often recall the moment immediately before the traumatic vision.²² These items thereby become substitutes for a nonexistent original, and often they are collectibles, since, to walk the tightrope between presence and absence, the fetishist requires incessant reproduction of that which stands for the nonexistent original.

Within the framework of such a reading, the bicycle in *Bicycles Thieves* comes to stand for the 'whole' woman, turned menacing in her irretrievability, which the narrative and visual quest attempt to reproduce by substitution. The role of the phallic woman, the traditional Freudian threat, is

here played by the commodity. Although women slip into predictable roles and locations (home, church, fortune teller parlour and whorehouse), the bicycle is fragmented and obsessively reproduced in parts, like an alluring yet horrifying Freudian Medusa.

The moment of the Freudian vision and of the painful acknowledgment of diversity and threat can be traced to the morning scene in which Bruno checks and cleans his father's vehicle. The bicycle is hanging from the ceiling, thus establishing a vertical perspective relative to the boy: Bruno gazes up at the 'original' Fides and reverently checks and touches its parts. In this process, the dented pedal is revealed as an imperfection in the bicycle, and although the little boy blames it on others ('Did you see what they did?'), the father unconcernedly acknowledges the possible existence of flaws in the original ('Perhaps it was there before').²³ In the morning sequence, where the boy and the adult act in a parallel fashion, showing themselves as two halves of the same male (interestingly gazing at himself in the mirror), the bicycle/woman reveals her diversity/imperfection, but this revelation troubles only the child-half of the character. Soon, however, her disappearance precipitates the doubled male character into panic sending him in a frightful quest for a lost sameness.

The bicycle market, which was discussed above as a key moment in both the picaresque quest and the Marxist narrative, marks a truly fetishistic moment in the film as well. Men (= virility) and bicycles (= commodity) proliferate at the market: they are one and the same, and they are both threatened by fetishism. Bicycles are everywhere, mostly dismembered rather than whole, and bicycle parts are stacked and divided methodically. Together these parts *could* make whole – this is indeed the aim of the group of men when they embark on the search: to identify and piece together the scattered parts to reconstruct the whole *Fides* – but it is soon obvious that the original whole is irretrievable, non-existent, especially as the collector gaze of the camera repeatedly dismembers whole bicycles by panning over wheels, seats, handlebars etc., lingering on parts and aliases without ever suggesting a constructive narrative.

Interestingly, despite the fact that Bruno, as his father admits, knows the *Fides* better than anybody else (the child is closest to the original, undivided whole), he is the one sent to look for the parts of the bicycle that are most accessorial and detachable (fetishistic): pumps and bells. It is furthermore not by chance the 'homosexual threat' is brought about through the alluring sound of the bell.

As the political and the sexual threat coincide, the quest for the actual bicycle (labour or phallus) ends here and it is turned thereafter into a picaresque and/or metaphysical quest for the quest.

Intersections

The three readings of *Bicycles Thieves* discussed above all end up in essence revealing a tale of loss: a magical object (Gaal-like and Qixotically delusional) is lost in the quest narrative, the value of labour is lost in the political text and the phallus is lost on a psychoanalytical level.

23 For a different interpretation of this detail – as referring to a dented paternal authority and as a testimony to the difference between narrative and metaphoric cinema – see Marcus (1986: 60–61).

24 For a different reading of the Circe moment, see West (2000: 148).

Reading Peter Dunn's description of the picaro one cannot help but think of the characters in De Sica's film: 'The picaro is someone on the move, a boy who is *becoming* what he is not yet, a man seeking to be other than what he is. From the point of view of social existence, the picaro is he who is not' (1979: 142). The have-nots which are-not: on the material as well as on the existential level, the picaresque identity of the characters is both lacking and transformational, just like the fetishistic discourses it elicits.

The ambiguity and irony of a picaresque tale of innocence and crime is interwoven with an evocative eulogy for human labour that laments the meaningless reproduction and excessive proliferation of commodities. In this light, the object of the quest appears not so much as the bicycle itself but as the erstwhile concept of labour. This economic fetishism at the same time overlaps with and is underscored by a psychoanalytical fetishism: it is not only the men's labour that is fragmented and alienated but also the 'original' phallus that is repeatedly acknowledged, denied and substituted, thereby becoming both reassuring and threatening.

The three readings of *Bicycle Thieves* thus frequently intersect and constructively reinforce one another. There is one moment in the film, however, in which they come together so neatly and aptly that it can be taken as a perfect visual case in point. After losing sight of the thief for the second time, Antonio and Bruno pursue a beggar who was earlier seen talking to him. They confront the beggar on a bridge, a classic *locus* of the quest narrative – of transition and possibility, but also of uncertainty and threat. In this beautifully constructed moment, the boy, the adult and the old man are joined in what looks like a statuary group, almost an allegory of human ages, or the summary of the past, present and future Italian male. Bruno and Antonio grab the beggar, who is holding in his left arm an empty can of tomatoes (quite disproportionate in size to today's viewer), which is later to be used in church to collect the charity meal. The label on the can reads 'Circe'. The commodity (the can of tomatoes) acts as Circe – both an archetypal figure of the *quête* and one of the many embodiments of the mighty female who perverts and annihilates men by alienating them from their humanity.²⁴ This commodified Circe, a Graal-like object that is literally empty yet simultaneously overlaid with implications, is nested at the centre of the screen, a testament to the undecided ideology of the film, both evoking and eluding multiple interpretations.

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Other youths: Italian cultural changes through Pasolini, Giordana, Petraglia and Rulli

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Abstract

Pasolini warned that petit bourgeoisie ideas were forming a new Italian youth characterized by nihilism, violence and self-destructiveness. Revisiting Pasolini pessimism by The Best of Youth, Giordana, Petraglia and Rulli show how an Italian generation coped with petit bourgeoisie culture and education.

Keywords

Pasolini
Giordana
The Best of Youth
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Rulli
Italian cultural
changes

The title of the movie, *The Best of Youth* (2003), especially in its original, Italian version, *La meglio gioventù*, not only evokes a suggestive and polemical subject for many readers of Italian poetry, but also puts forwards an intriguing approach to cultural changes of Italy between 1966 and 2000.

As many Italians and students of Italian grammar know, the expression *La meglio gioventù* is grammatically wrong. The correct forms are *la migliore gioventù*, which means the best youth, or *il meglio della gioventù*, which means the best of youth. In today's colloquial Italian, the expression – coming from local languages – *La meglio gioventù* is common and accepted; it designates the best of a new generation. In 1954, Pier Paolo Pasolini titled one of his collections of poems *La meglio gioventù: poesie friulane*/The Best Youth: Friulian Poems, and the movie *The Best of Youth* of director Marco Tullio Giordana and scriptwriters Sandro Petraglia and Stefano Rulli widely draws on Pasolini's ideas of Italian society.

Beyond the coincidence of titles, Pasolini's presence in *The Best of Youth* is ubiquitous. Countless references throughout the whole movie reflect characters, episodes and ideas of Pasolini's works and life; even his calligraphy is digitized for the title font on the movie poster. Thus, *The Best of Youth* takes on a very heated argument: the cultural changes of Italians after World War II. On this subject, the author of *La meglio gioventù: poesie friulane* was certainly a humanist forerunner, a conscientious and passionate scholar, and Giordana, Petraglia and Rulli, focusing on otherness, have proposed through their movie a revision of Pasolini's pessimistic judgment on social and cultural values in modern Italy.

- 1 Fascism did not tolerate dialects, signs of the irrational unity of this country where I was born, unacceptable and brazen realities in the heart of nationalists. *'Il poeta delle ceneri/The poet of Ashes'* (Pasolini 1993: 2059). (This and all the following translations of Pasolini texts are by the author.)

The Best of Youth or, in Friulian, La miej zoventút, and The Second Form of 'The Best Youth'

A crucial aspect of Italy's cultural changes after World War II was the spreading of written and spoken Italian and the declining or changing use of local dialects and languages, and Pasolini was deeply concerned with it. In the 1950s, by that grammar mistake for his poetry collection, he also underlined that his verses were written in a regional language, Friulian, the tongue of his mother's birthplace, Friuli, a northeastern Italian region, where Pasolini spent some of his juvenile years.

Writing, publishing or shooting movies in local idioms may involve different meanings and intentions for Italian authors. It could be a challenge to authoritarian cultural policies. Fascism, for example, strongly propagandized the linguistic unification of Italians through the Italian language, and opposed the tenaciously widespread regional tongues.¹ Yet, in 1942 Pasolini published *Poesie a Casarsa/Poems at Casarsa* (1942), his first collection of poems in Friulian.

After the fall of Fascism, many Italian neorealist cinematographers recovered local dialects and languages to show the complicated social and linguistic reality of their country. It was a very efficacious way to demonstrate a diversified as well as rich cultural heritage. Only then, many Italians discovered local folk cultures of their homeland, which, however, was also becoming quickly a wealthier, industrial country, where the Italian language was going to be more spoken and spread. In 1948, Luchino Visconti, for example, directed *La terra trema/The Earth Trembles*, whose non-professional actors, the real inhabitants of Acitrezza, spoke their own Sicilian language, which most Italians only understood by reading the Italian subtitles; but in 1960, the same author released in Italian *Rocco e i suoi fratelli/Rocco and His Brothers*, a drama on the difficult social integration of a southern Italian peasant family into the booming, industrial Milan.

In the 1950s, Pasolini began to be known as a new author with a keen interest in folk culture. In 1954, *La meglio gioventù: poesie friulane* collected Friulan poems he had written between 1941 and 1953. His *Poesia dialettale del Novecento/Dialectal Poetry of the Twentieth Century* (1952, co-edited with Mario Dell'Arco) and *Canzoniere italiano, antologia della poesia popolare/Collection of Italian Poems, Anthology of Folk Poetry* (1955) confirmed Pasolini's profound love for the Italian peasant cultures. Two novels, *Ragazzi di vita* (1955)/*The Ragazzi* (c2007) and *Una vita violenta* (1959)/*A violent life* (c2007), however, made him undeniably a protagonist of the Italian cultural debate, and revealed another social and linguistic reality, *le borgate*, the Roman slums, which also inspired his first movies *Accattone* (1961) and *Mamma Roma* (1962).

Among Pasolini's works in local dialects and languages, the Friulan poems were a recurring theme. *La meglio gioventù: poesie friulane* includes in its first part the above mentioned *Poesie a Casarsa* and *Suite Furlana/Friulian Suite* (1944–49) and in its second part *La meglio gioventù*, which consists of two sections: *El testament Coràn/The Testament of Corán* (1947–52) and *Romancero/Collection of Romances* (1953). In *La meglio gioventù: poesie friulane*

Pasolini aimed to contrast youth with the imminence of its disappearing because, as the melancholic poem *La miei zoventùt* tells it, young Friulians were leaving their regional homeland to work abroad, where those cheerful boys would never laugh again (Pasolini 1981: 153). Abandoning their country's culture the best Italian youth were doomed to vanish.

Before he was murdered in 1975, Pasolini republished *La meglio gioventù: poesie friulane* in *La nuova gioventù; Poesie friulane 1941–1974/The New Youth; Friulian Poems 1941–1974*, which included unpublished Friulian poems he had written during the 1940s and 1950s and, above all, an entire new collection, *La seconda forma de 'La meglio gioventù'* (1974), i.e. *The Second Form of 'The Best Youth'*. For this last collection, Pasolini rewrote some poems and took some subjects from his first version of *La meglio gioventù*, expressing a pessimistic opinion on the future of Italy. His dedication, for example, at the beginning of *Poesie a Casarsa* (1941–43) says:

Water fountain of my native village.
No water is fresher than the one of my village.
Fountain of country love. (Pasolini 1981: 7)

but in *La seconda forma de 'La meglio gioventù'* it becomes:
Water fountain of a village that is not mine.
No water is older than the one of that village.
Fountain of love for nobody. (Pasolini 1981: 167)

This pessimism is consistent with the ideas that Pasolini presented in many newspapers and magazine articles, mainly collected in *Scritti corsari/Pirate Writings* (1975) and *Lettere luterane* (1976)/*Lutheran letters* (1983). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, he stated that Italians had lost their rich and generous cultural identity because of the fast economic changes that began after World War II.

Pasolini thought that increasing consumerism anthropologically changed Italians, who became massively *petit bourgeois*. Consequently, the new, wealthier and supposedly better-educated youth were unable to follow the revolutionary impulse of the poor and ignorant, but sincere and unselfish, older Italians. According to Pasolini, the impressive income growth quickly achieved by Italians generated a compulsive consumerism that badly concealed the shortcomings of *petit bourgeois* education and illusory progress. Because of their new, poorer social culture, young Italians were more ignorant, selfish and violent. For a committed scholar and author like Pasolini, in these conditions, and without the preservation and enrichment of fundamental cultural values, social progress was no longer possible.²

Another youth?

Starting from similar concerns about juvenile culture and the difficult maturation of an Italian generation, we see a different thesis in the movie *The Best of Youth*. In their work, director Giordana and scriptwriters

- 2 For Pasolini, real social progress was completely different from mere development or economic growth. For him, progress had to be understood in Marxist terms through the overall cultural advancement of society.

3 There are two Italian adaptations of *The Best of Youth*: the theatrical one lasts 383 minutes, and it is presented in two parts; the TV version, instead, is 400 minutes long and is shown in four episodes. At the Cannes Festival, where it won the *Un certain regard* award in 2003, *The Best of Youth* was 358 minutes long. Also the theatrical version for the United States is divided in two parts, but is shorter – it lasts 366 minutes – than the Italian adaptation. Originally, *The Best of Youth* was shot as episodes of a movie for the Italian public TV.

4 Through the characters of Giorgia, the mental patient, and Nicola Carati, who will become a psychiatrist, the movie authors – as Petraglia told me – wanted to show ‘the only utopia of Italian 1968 that had been realized’ with the law 180, the Italian reform of psychiatric institutions (Cupolo: 2006; see also MAKIN’GO: 2007). The elimination of electroshock therapy as systematic, punitive treatment of mental patients, specifically, was a crucial point in the reform program and, in Turin, Nicola takes some victims of electroshock abuse to witness in a court against a psychiatrist. Furthermore, Franco Basaglia, the psychiatrist who was the protagonist of the reform, is directly quoted by Nicola as his ‘maestro’ (master,

Petraglia and Rulli aim to show the problematic or tragic perception of otherness through the parallel lives of two brothers, Matteo and Nicola Carati, and those of their friends and relatives.

For a long time, Petraglia and Rulli collected much material on Italian youth through their own experiences and from stories they heard from friends. But the crucial ‘switch’ in the scriptwriting of *The Best of Youth* was the idea of organizing those materials through the lives of two brothers (MAKIN’GO 2007); then Petraglia and Rulli also decided that one of the two brothers, Matteo, died (Cupolo 2006). As we will see later, such decisions may also have come from a reference to Pasolini’s life, specifically from the relation between Pasolini and his brother Guido, who was killed by Communist partisans in February 1945.

The movie rethinks the ethical values discussed not only by Pasolini, but also by wide, progressive sectors of the Italian society in the 1970s and 1980s. Would authenticity and unselfishness of emerging well-educated classes lead the reforms of Italian institutions and society? What kind of moral values were young Italians looking for during the 1960s and 1970s?

The Best of Youth lasts more than six hours.³ Some of its episodes, however, help to summarize and compare the different answers of Pasolini and Giordana, Petraglia and Rulli to the questions discussed above.

In the summer of 1966, the Carati brothers are about to travel to northern Europe with their friends. But Matteo meets a young woman Giorgia, a patient in a mental hospital, and realizes that she is being treated with electroshock therapy.⁴

Giorgia’s situation moves Matteo. He gives up his university exam in Italian literature and decides to save Giorgia from electroshock treatment. Matteo surreptitiously takes her out of the hospital, and Nicola joins him to bring Giorgia back to her family. Their plan, however, fails. Giorgia’s father believes she should remain in hospital, and Matteo ends up quarrelling with him. Later, two policemen find Giorgia alone and take her away. Matteo, then, parts from Nicola, who travels alone to northern Europe, meets some hippies, works in Norway for a short time, but does not reach the ultimate destination which he, his brother and their friends had established for their trip: North Cape (Norway). Matteo, on the other hand, obsessed by a sort of search for truth, order and justice, renounces the trip, abandons his promising university studies, and enlists in the army.

In the fall, Nicola goes back to Italy to help with the rescue of artistic works from the flood of Florence in 1966. (Here we start to see how the movie is accurately framed through crucial real events of Italian history; the river Arno actually flooded Florence on 4 November 1966.) There Nicola encounters his brother, whose battalion is also working to save artistic works, above all, ancient manuscripts. In *The Best of Youth*, scenes related to saving the past and restoring artistic works always emphasize reconciliations, love or meetings of relatives and friends.

In Florence, Nicola meets Giulia, a temperamental pianist and university student of mathematics from Turin. They fall in love, and Nicola

moves to study at the University of Turin. He becomes a psychiatrist and joins the movement to reform Italian mental hospitals. Later in the movie, Nicola rescues Giorgia and other patients from their seclusion in a dismal asylum, and helps her to start a new, independent life in a community house for ex-mental patients.

Matteo, by contrast, always restless and pursuing his obsessions, completes military services and enlists with the police; making Nicola a psychiatrist and Matteo a policeman also was a crucial decision in the scriptwriting of *The Best of Youth* (MAKIN'GO 2007).

Matteo loves books and reading, but they do not help him to find peace. Adverse, but not casual, circumstances, anger and especially self-delusion end up isolating him. Even though he courts Mirella, who sincerely loves him, Matteo is unhappy, alone and unable to establish serene relationships. Since his first meeting with Mirella, he lies to her, introducing himself as Nicola, which is his brother's name, and also pretending to be an engineer. He intentionally skips an appointment with Mirella and inexplicably leaves her. But she discovers Matteo's real job, and traces him to the police headquarters. There they part after a short and heated discussion. Later, Matteo visits his parents' home, where the Caratis are spending the New Year's Eve together. He seems happy to see his parents – above all his mother – but suddenly leaves with an excuse, and goes back to his apartment. There, he tries, without conviction, to phone Mirella, and briefly watches a TV show. Finally, Matteo kills himself in the first minutes of 1984.

Between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, Matteo, like his brother Nicola, lives through tumultuous changes in Italian society. In 1966, for example, Nicola and his friends already realize what is going to happen in the following years. University degrees were no longer securing jobs. It was the first important sign of an imminent change; the optimism and hopes of the Italian post-World War II years had faded. Two years later, a surge of student protests will also be a clamorous expression of that disappointment, and Nicola actively participates in the occupation of *Palazzo Campana* in Turin, a key event in the Italian students' movement in 1968.⁵

Another episode – in Turin again, but during 1974 – introduces '*gli anni di piombo*' (the years of bullets), when political violence and terrorism raged in Italy: Escaping from one of the frequent street clashes between protesters and police of those years, Nicola and Giulia find refuge in the beautiful and serene courtyard of an ancient building; there Giulia reveals to Nicola that she is pregnant with their child. They do not know that Matteo also is in Turin commanding a police patrol to stop protests, and the quietness of the Nicola and Giulia scene strongly contrasts with the streets' tension and violence.

During the clashes, Matteo's subordinate and close friend Luigi, a southern Italian, is surrounded and hit by some protesters. To save his companion Matteo hurls himself into the fray and wildly beats a demonstrator; later we know that Luigi will remain paralyzed in a wheelchair, and the demonstrator is severely wounded because of the beating inflicted on him by Matteo.

teacher) when Matteo asks 'Who's he?' pointing at a portrait of Basaglia in Nicola's office.

- 5 Student occupations of *Palazzo Campana* were in 1967–68 some of the most evident signs of the incoming Italian 1968. This same building, incidentally, is named – a unique occurrence in Italy – after the battle nickname *Campana* of Marquis Felice Cordero di Pamparato, a hero of Italian resistance against Nazism. 'Thus, one arrives almost imperceptibly at the symbolic level: and on this level no less than a concrete level *Palazzo Campana* became the seat of a privileged communicative space' (Passerini 1996: 69–70).

- 6 As Matteo and Nicola well summarize in the following short dialogue, Matteo and Giulia have a similar temperament:

Matteo: When she plays (the piano) she does not look bad.

Nicola: Actually she isn't bad.

Matteo: She is like the kind 'I am always right'.

Nicola: Bravo. Quite like you.

- 7 *The Best of Youth* also is a work of *cinephiles*. The falling in love of Nicola and Mirella is introduced by an elegant, musical quotation *Jules et Jim*: *Catherine et Jim* of George Delarue from Francois Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1962); like *Jules and Jim*, Nicola and Matteo also love the same woman.

After the clashes, Nicola meets his still-furious brother at the police headquarters. Nicola is able, at least momentarily, to calm down Matteo, and invites him to his apartment in Turin, where Nicola lives with Giulia. Previously we see Nicola sharing this place with his friends Carlo, who studies economics at the university, and Vitale, a Sicilian blue-collar worker at FIAT.

At the apartment, however, Matteo and Giulia have a discussion about violence against police. She is a leftist radical militant. Like Matteo, Giulia also obsessively pursues a sort of idealistic, just order.⁶ Even her piano playing should be as perfect and precise as maths; otherwise she does not play. Giulia's search for justice appears soon as a reaction to the difficulties of living her roles as mother and political militant. Consumed with conflicting inner feelings, she ends up abandoning her family, and becomes a leftist terrorist. But after the suicide of Matteo, Nicola decides to avoid another family tragedy at all costs. He reveals to his sister Giovanna, who is a judge, the time and place – the Coliseum – of an appointment his ex-partner has made to see their daughter Sara, and Giulia is arrested and jailed.

Despite these tragic events, at the end of the movie, which exudes hope, Nicola and Mirella fall in love,⁷ and Andrea, the son Mirella has from her short relationship with Matteo, completes the travel to northern Europe, which his uncle Nicola had started but never finished, and his father Matteo had never started. In the final part of the movie, we also see that Giulia, the ex-partner of Nicola, overcomes her existential problems. After years of jail, she is finally free, works in the National Library of Florence, and meets her daughter Sara. Giulia, at last, is able to play music again for her daughter, who studies to be an art restorer, and will soon be a wife and mother.

The search for justice, the supposed unselfishness of Matteo and Giulia, and their social and political concerns therefore, may also be more apparent than real. Anger, loneliness, incomprehension and obsessions rather cast a shadow of pathological deviancy on the background of their tormented lives. Middle-class status does not save them from nihilism, violence and self-destructiveness. As reality clashes with the expectations of Matteo and Giulia, *petit bourgeoisie* culture, education and values isolate these characters in a hopeless world. Books and reading do not give the answers Matteo is desperately looking for. Giulia, on the other hand, feels herself trapped in the roles of wife and mother, and her political choice of terrorism is a deceitful escape. Pasolini's pessimistic view of the replacement of the Italian cultural authenticity with *petit bourgeoisie* culture, values and roles seems to prevail here.

Nicola, however, is different. Culture, authenticity and unselfishness merge not only into his daily work, but also into his being a caring father, relative and friend. Even if Pasolini's severe judgement on the *petite bourgeoisie* is partially denied in this case, his bitter reflection warns against the illusory worlds that middle-class culture and ideas may create. Giordana, Petraglia and Rulli, showing the complexity or tragic ambivalence of existential problems, seem to conclude that sincere individual and social awareness of others' sufferings should prevail over the importance of affluence and cultural and educational achievements.

Pasolini and otherness

The movie supports the above-mentioned thesis not only through accurate historical references, but also by questioning the choices and shortcomings of Italian society and politics.⁸

The first establishing shot of *The Best of Youth* announces, 'Rome, Summer 1966'. Matteo, Nicola and their friend Carlo are studying for the summer sessions of university exams when the Caratis' father, Angelo, asks Matteo for help. His son, in an annoyed tone, replies that he cannot interrupt the reading of a Natalino Sapegno book.⁹ Father and son exchange a few words about Sapegno; Angelo does not know that Sapegno is a famous author of Italian literary criticism.¹⁰ Matteo suggests his father should ask Nicola and Carlo, in the next room, for help, and these latter will take a TV set downstairs to put it on the rack of the father's car.

A few shots and cues introduce the years before the stormy changes in Italian society. We immediately realize that the traditional patriarchal pattern of family has already lost its grasp over the younger generations. In the 1940s, Matteo's attitude would have stirred up the angry reaction of an Italian father. Angelo instead reacts to Matteo's tone and words with a sincere effort of comprehension and support for his son, and Nicola is 'friendly' to his father without showing traditional reverence.

Education appears at once a crucial goal. In the 1960s, an increasing number of Italians study in previously elite universities, and culture is seen as a strong commitment to improving oneself and society; soon we will also know that the Caratis' mother, Adriana, is an understanding and willing teacher at a public middle school.

The Caratis live in an old building at the centre of Rome. At the time some emerging middle classes still lived in areas whose spaces and relations had been shared for a long time among different activities and social sectors. The exclusivity of luxury urban and suburban areas for middle and upper social classes was barely starting. In the Carati apartment, furniture and objects – books, above all – are placed around according to the needs of current, changing circumstances, as it often happens in houses of families that are improving their status. Many objects reveal the goals of their owners, but a relatively good social position does not mean consumerism or futility. By contrast to stereotypes of the Italian way and style of life – sometimes epitomized erroneously as *la dolce vita* – the Caratis show that they live unpretentiously. Characters of *The Best of Youth* arrange their lives simply amid their given circumstances. Only at the movie's end, a restored Tuscan country house with a pool will be the background of a family meeting.

The Best of Youth, in its initial sequences, shows the habits and behaviours of a wide range of Italian social sectors in the 1960s, especially of some emerging middle classes. Although family incomes had impressively increased in the previous years, avidity was judged in negative terms; Italians saved rather parsimoniously. Some individual business initiatives could even be viewed suspiciously; the Caratis' parents, for example, have a discussion because Angelo, the father, puts a lien on their home to start

8 At his first exam, for example, Nicola receives not only an excellent grade but also the suggestion to leave Italy and study abroad. His examiner – an authentic 'barone', according to the Italian definition of a university professor belonging to a sort of privileged caste – says: 'Leave Italy while you still can [. . .] Italy is a country to be destroyed [. . .] A beautiful but useless place, destined to die'. Later, Nicola also gives a pessimistic opinion of the shortcomings and future of Italy. During a conversation with his friend Carlo, Nicola says that the idea of an Italy as 'transparent' as Sweden, Denmark, and Netherlands is an illusion.

9 Matteo is reading a volume of a very well-known book by Natalino Sapegno (1901–90), *Il compendio di storia della letteratura italiana/The Compendium of History of Italian Literature*, 1964, which still is a fundamental textbook for many students of Italian literature; Sapegno taught at the University of Rome from 1937 to 1976.

10 Sapegno also edited a very popular *Divina commedia*, which has been widely used in Italian schools. Probably Angelo, who met his wife for the first time when he was selling oranges in the very Roman *Campo dei Fiori* open market, did not attend high school.

- 11 Giordana, Petraglia and Rulli deeply analysed Pasolini's diversity and death through their movie *Pasolini: un delitto italiano/Pasolini: An Italian Crime* (2005).

a contract agency. Educational and cultural achievements, instead, are crucial goals; books are stacked around in these first scenes, and some book quotations are key clues to the movie's interpretation.

At the very beginning of *The Best of Youth*, the removal of the TV set underlines that the Caratis are a family with a certain type of values. It also is – with some self-irony – a reference to Pasolini.

The Best of Youth is a production of Italian public television, RAI (*Radio Televisione Italiana*). RAI began TV programmes in Italy in 1954, and the RAI monopoly over Italian TV transmissions lasted until the 1980s. In the first decades of its existence, RAI aimed to support the cultural role of TV, by following the political, religious and economic values of the Christian Democratic leadership. Today, hundreds of TV channels, and, above all, the so-called trash-TV, pollute Italian culture, as do many other media. Since the 1960s, however, Pasolini had stated that the influence of TV over Italian culture was going to be deeply negative. The movie-makers evidently recall Pasolini's prophecy on TV's fateful influence, and in the movie, TV images and sounds always emphasize or are the background for difficult situations or tragic events.

The macabre but also lighthearted present Angelo gives to Nicola, right after putting the TV set on the car rack, is a human skeleton. It looks like a suggestion to study human beings, to understand how they are really made and how they think and act, instead of watching TV, which would carry an incumbent threat of Fascism and death. Angelo, with his Roman accent and friendliness, hands out a task and a warning to his son, who will become a psychiatrist, a man whose task is to comprehend and help others.

Otherness, indeed, emerges as a crucial topic of the movie. *The Best of Youth* shows how anybody may be assumed, for any reason, as a different and potentially dangerous, if not hostile, individual. The repeated references to Pasolini thus intertwine through a narrative interpretation of diversity and otherness. In the movie's background, Pasolini's life as a different, intellectual and homosexual individual, and as a committed author, remains as a stoic and tragic challenge to social and cultural conformity.¹¹ Following and questioning Pasolini's unorthodox Marxist populism and anti-conformity, the authors of *The Best of Youth* introduce the comprehension of otherness as a leading moral principle for future generations of Italians.

Giorgia, because of her mental condition, is the an extreme case of otherness, but, since the very beginning of the movie, with the angry answers to his father, Matteo also appears restless, as if he feels a constant uneasiness. Shortly afterwards, during a party Matteo looks isolated and awkward, while his alter ego, brother Nicola, appears very sociable and even forwards with a girl.

Later, the young prostitute Cati, with a heavy Roman accent, says to Nicola that Matteo is 'strange'. The conversation between Nicola and Cati takes place in a miserable room. Near the bed, some chickens cluck in a small cage. From a flaking wall a poster of 'Breakfast at Tiffany's' ironically watches over Nicola's sexual initiation by Cati, who obviously belongs to the Pasolini

world of *borgate*. True to the nature of a Pasolini character, she, through spontaneous humanism and comprehension, feels that Matteo is different. The tone of her comment compels the audience to look beyond social and cultural differences. The unconventional job and culture of Cati may appear embarrassing but also understandable; prostitution was an accepted line of work for some women of *borgate*. Matteo, however, is 'strange' for her.

Matteo is attracted by Giorgia's otherness. He is moved by Luigi's modest goals, too. Yet, though Matteo is a cultivated reader and careful observer of social and individual realities, his attempts to rescue and help Giorgia and Luigi seem to arise from violent or self-punitive impulses.

Also in the above-mentioned episode of Turin, we may see both the very direct reference to Pasolini and its interpretation by the authors. Many Italians remember the frequent clashes between demonstrators and the police at the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s. One in particular occurred in Rome, and became very widely known: 'The Battle of Valle Giulia'. Valle Giulia is a place close to the School of Architecture building, where on 1 March 1968 university students surprisingly dragged the police, who were guarding the School, to flight. Pasolini then released for the journal *Nuovi Argomenti* the poem *Il PCI ai giovani/The Italian Communist Party to Youth*, taking the side of the police because, as some verses explained it, the young *petit bourgeois* students had beaten up the young proletarian cops (Pasolini 1993b: 1851). Apart from voicing this opinion, Pasolini was focusing on the new youth that the bureaucratized Italian Communist Party had to cope with. Some sectors of the Italian leftist intelligentsia, which supported students, felt, however, that Pasolini's poem attacked them and the 1968 political movements and on 16 June 1968 *L'Espresso* – a popular leftist magazine – organized a roundtable on the Battle of Valle Giulia and *Il PCI ai giovani*, the outrageous title of which was '*Vi odio cari studenti*' (I hate you, dear students). In conclusion, the whole issue became an authentic political and cultural 'case'. For years, *Il PCI ai giovani* has been discussed, criticized, praised and condemned; it was still widely quoted during the violent clashes between the police and the anti-global demonstrators at Genoa in July 2001 during a G8 meeting.¹²

The Carati brothers, the student Nicola and the policeman Matteo, come from Pasolini's concerns about the future – and violence – of the new Italian youth (*La nuova gioventù*). Matteo's restless behaviour contrasts with Nicola's empathy and search for life. During the Turin clashes, Matteo wildly reacts against the demonstrators. Giulia and Nicola, however, find refuge in an ancient building, and she says at the door's intercom: 'I am pregnant! Open, please!' Nicola believes she is lying to get inside, but when they feel safe in the peaceful courtyard of the palace, Giulia first takes from her pocket a '*sanpietrino*', the cobblestones many European students threw at the police in 1968, and drops it on the floor. Right after that, she makes Nicola understand that her pregnancy was not an excuse. He is surprised but happy above all to become a father. As a partner, father, psychiatrist or simply a friend Nicola always tries to comprehend and

12 See, for example, Stella (2001) and the polemic comment of Antonio Negri, '*Così cominciò a cadere l'impero*' in *Multitudes Web* (Mise en ligne décembre 2001) on 'Pasolini's rap'. See also Ginsborg (1998: 416–17).

- 13 Petraglia and Rulli believed that the father role was more important to explain the changes in Italian society; later, they would abandon this idea (MAKIN'GO 2007).
- 14 Giorgia says: 'Matteo matto? Matto da legare?' (Matteo mad? Stark raving mad?)

accept the other, even in the most difficult or unpredictable situations. Later at the police headquarters, Nicola, through a clever and very patient restarting of conversation, is also able to calm down Matteo. During a university exam, a professor very clearly explains it: Nicola is, in Italian, *simpatico* (nice, likeable, pleasant, agreeable), according to the original Greek meaning: *sun-pàthein*; i.e. sharing the pathos, the suffering of others. Matteo, instead, would want to be closer to others, but he himself is tragically the 'other' for everybody, including his own relatives.

Conclusions

Through simple but meticulously assembled coincidences, the movie of Giordana, Petraglia and Rulli reveals incomprehension, suffering, fondness, anguishes and love, but above all glimmers of sudden, long-awaited and hopeful understanding. Matteo photographs Giorgia's hands, and a picture also shows the burns left by electroshock on her temple. Later, a picture of Matteo's hands partially hiding his glance will take Nicola to meet Mirella, the ex-girlfriend of his brother.

Hands, gestures, glances, smiles, fits of rage and crying take us to the discovery of others' feelings and sufferings. Scriptwriting and filming in this way might convert *The Best of Youth* into a soap opera, considering, above all, that the scriptwriters have largely resorted to the returning-references device that characterizes soap opera structures. Such references, however, are assembled, especially in the movie's first part, through a powerful and intelligent historical frame, which converts *The Best of Youth* into a sort of popular, educational and epic fiction about an Italian generation. Details and sequences such as soundtrack, travelling and meetings and dialogues with relatives, friends, mental patients, a southern peasant, prostitutes, university professors, priests, a corrupted politician, and dozens of other characters represent common and yet diverse people of those years. The movie, books and quotations from books or literary works also help the viewer to understand a very complicated but decisive period of recent Italian history.

A complete interpretation of the movie can, for instance, be carried out only through its literary references. Here, I want to briefly indicate how some ideas associated with literary works may be taken as implicit parallels between the movie and Pasolini's ideas and life.

At the beginning of *The Best of Youth*, the discussion on Sapegno and Matteo's attitude immediately show – as I mentioned above – the decline of the traditional paternal authority.¹³ This is a common topic of many Italian literary and filmic works. Without a father, the central figure of the patriarchal peasant society, *Rocco and his brothers*, for example, move to Milan and their family breaks up. Rocco and his brothers, however, still look like Pasolini's *miej zoventút*; they are doomed to no longer laugh after leaving their homeland and peasant culture. Instead, the *petit bourgeois*, well-educated Matteo, whose name – as Giorgia jokes about it – in Italian is similar to *matto* (mad),¹⁴ mentions as an example of religious poetry *Il*

*beccaio*¹⁵ by Antonio da Ferrara (1315–70?), a poet who curses his father and mother, and the seed from which he was born:

Curse the will that kindled the father
of my sad limbs
to strew his seed and my pain.
After I curse the mother body
where the mingled, wretched soul
was added to this paste
more painful than that of Jocast. (My translation) (da Ferrara 1967: 127)

This sacrilegious reference is very much representative of Matteo's generation.¹⁶ As it truly happened in 1968, many young Italians hurled themselves against the most solid – at least until then – institution of their society: the family, and above all against their parents.¹⁷ In the first dialogue of the movie, Matteo holds a sort of grudge against his father, and will not be able to meet him when he is dying of cancer. Later, Matteo moves to Rome, but does not communicate this to his family. His sister Giovanna, the judge, discovers where he is living and has a discussion with him. Exasperated by her brother's attitude, she shouts at him, 'What did we do to you to deserve something like this?' They perhaps did not do anything to Matteo, but he looks like an Oedipus fatally wounded by the love for his mother Jocasta, the mythological character mentioned by *Il Beccaio*. Pasolini's pessimistic judgement, then, may singularly return to show the tortuous pathological formation of nihilist personalities through the morbid relations of *petit bourgeois* families.

According to Petraglia (Cupolo 2006), Matteo is a Dostoevskyan character condemned not only to loneliness but also to die. The tormenting, self-punitive duties chosen by Matteo indeed recall the obsessions of Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, the main character of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, and in Raskolnikov Pasolini recognizes the destructive and self-destructive personality, originated by an unsolved Oedipus complex:

(Raskolnikov) [. . .] is 'traumatized' by the love for his mother (and for extension for his sister). [. . .] it is an Oedipus infantile passion. He is petrified by that love experienced and reciprocated with so much violence, almost like in a laboratory test. The consequences are, in fact, those well known: sex phobia, sexual coldness, and sadism. He seems to fall in love [. . .] (but) In this love there is no place for sensuality. He feels attractions [. . .] for two other very young girls: a drunk or drug addicted teenager [. . .] and after, for a moment, for another young beggar (therefore it is a pity; and pity is humiliating, it may be humiliating till sadism). 'Objective' and mostly conscious elements are added to this sexual situation (the Oedipus relation with the mother extended to the sister) [. . .] Creating, thus, obligations toward the family, terrible duties of gratitude and love, which are added right at the loving, infantile violence, and at the unconscious repression of his mother on him. A good mother, certainly, good, even better, angelica; bourgeois, but

15 *Beccaio* in old regional Italian means butcher or slaughterer, and in a wider sense executioner.

16 Marco Bellocchio's *Pugni in tasca/Fists in the Pockets* (1965) was the first movie to fully show the desperate, self-destructive feelings of this Italian generation.

17 On the conflictive relations between young Italians and their families during 1968 see 'Choosing to be Orphans' in (Passerini 1996: 22–36).

- 18 In the following episode, Giulia, who is already a terrorist, receives a file from a man in a movie theatre. Later, in her apartment, Giulia opens the file and sees the picture of Carlo, the husband of Nicola's sister Francesca. Carlo, a father, is now the target of a terrorist attack.
- 19 *Spoon River Anthology* through the 1943 translation of Fernando Pivano was a very popular reading for young Italians in those years.
- 20 As a last reference to Greek mythology, the name of Andrea's girlfriend is Hermione, who was the promised spouse of Neoptolemus (also Neoptólemos or Pyrrhus), the son of Achilles.
- 21 Petraglia has noticed these key autobiographical references in some of Pasolini's movies (Petraglia 1974: 85–105).

with all the best qualities of the provincial bourgeois: that special idealism, i.e., which cannot make of her own son but an adored and unique being. Thus our hero is led by unconscious, and he gets ready, as in Kafkian nightmare, to play the role assigned to him; he cannot escape from it; he becomes robot like. But, through this role, he can however look for some justifications and use them as pretexts, of (aberrant as we will see) moralistic and theoretical foundations. (Pasolini 1996: 323–24)

Right after the quarrel with his sister, Matteo has a fit of rage and hurls everything from a shelf; the camera, then, frames the objects on the floor and pauses on a portrait of Giulia, who refuses her mother role.¹⁸ Nicola and the younger sister Francesca, who marries Carlo, are able to rebuild, in the first case, and build, in the second, families, whereas Matteo's feelings for his family are too divided between contradictions as intense as hate and love; he is unable to live with them.

Without a family, Matteo unconsciously knows he is condemned to loneliness and maybe to die. He has to cope with life and play his game alone, and he confesses it by reading to Giorgia *Tom Beatty the Gambler* from the *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters.¹⁹ It is a pathetic attempt at comprehension; it would seem Matteo wants to help Giorgia, but he is trying to overcome his own problems.

At the end of *The Best of Youth*, the Dostoevskyan Matteo, unexpectedly, becomes a hero. As Nicola explains to Andrea, Matteo was like Achilles:²⁰

He was courageous and sad like him. Because he knew gods would soon take him back. You know how gods are, don't you? The best, the ones they love most. First they send them to earth then they take them back. But they allow them to leave a *mark* so we cannot forget them. You are that mark.

Here, through modern literary mythology created by Dostoevsky and Greek mythology, the common concerns of Pasolini and the authors of *The Best of Youth* coincide and diverge once again as it often happens throughout the whole movie. I believe Giordana, Petraglia and Rulli were surprised by the historical complexities they wanted to show through their work. While the reconciliation of Giulia and Sara by music and art restoration develops through the original narrative structure of *The Best of Youth*, the final redemption of Matteo, like that of a hero, closes the movie, removing the Oedipus conflict. On the other hand, through Pasolini's explanation of his family relations, we may discover that Guido, the dead brother of Pasolini, resembles Matteo.²¹ As Nicola loves his mother and frantically reads the language she teaches, Guido also falls in love with his mother through her language:

There where that dialect was spoken, he in fact
fell in love with my mother
In this way, through her, the little, almost black, inferior
world of peasants that he despised

made of him a slave:
 but even this time, he did not know it.
 He did not know his master was that love,
 which through a little girl woman (my mother!)
 beautiful, with a beautiful throat, with a too innocent soul
 of angel unfit to live out from villages, precisely from the countryside,
 had thwarted his all moral certainties
 of wretched man made to be him, the master.
 (*Il poeta delle ceneri/The Poet of Ashes*) (Pasolini 1993: 2058)

22 See Pasolini's opinion of the new role of young women in *Descrizioni di descrizioni* (1996: 428–34).

23 Paul Ginsborg (2003: 43), for example, underlines that there is not only the *petit bourgeoisie* condemned by Pasolini.

Pasolini, Giordana, Petraglia and Rulli, in conclusion, share a common concern about the consequences of the decline of paternal authority, the emergence of a new, problematic woman and/or mother role,²² and the loss of traditional values associated altogether with the rise of the *petit bourgeoisie* or middle-class values and culture. To cope with the predominance of this new social class, Pasolini even invites the new Italian youth to a collective auto-analysis in his *Apologia/Apology* written after the publication *Il PCI ai giovani*, and the characters of *The Best of Youth* fight epically to build an ethical dimension that aims to overcome the feeling of irremediable loss denounced by Pasolini. These latter take the audience through an Italy that may surprise but does not disappoint. This Italy no longer wants to show herself only by self-irony, sophisticated photographic language and staging, or cynicism and violence. Through the movie, a reflexive Italian middle class²³ looks for another approach to the very existential problems that may torment everybody's life.

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'Say Something Left-Wing!' Nanni Moretti's *Il Caimano*

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Abstract

Nanni Moretti is perhaps the most influential of all of Italy's contemporary film-makers and has achieved, since the release of *Caro Diario/Dear Diary* (1994), an international reputation. Moretti has played a significant role in the Italian cinema industry since the release of his first film *Io sono un autarchico/I am Self-Sufficient* in 1977, emerging 'as a somewhat unwilling spokesman for his decidedly disaffected generation' (Porton and Ellickson 1995: 11). An inheritor of the film-making tradition of neorealism (Rascaroli 2003), Moretti is a total film-maker who has worked (and continues to work) as an actor, producer, writer and director; in addition to which he runs his own production and distribution companies. Moretti's creative independence empowers his cinema, enabling him to use film to communicate to a broad public. Moretti's status has also meant that he has become a satirical independent political 'agitator', incensed by the corruption of the Italian right and dejected by the lassitude of the left. Moretti's films are engaged with a political and aesthetic critique of contemporary media (both in an Italian context and an international context), taking film and television as their object alongside party politics in an interestingly complex and self-reflexive fashion.

The phrase, 'say something left-wing' originates from a scene in Moretti's 1998 film *Aprile* in which an incredulous Moretti watches Italy's Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi denounce the Italian magistracy on a popular current affairs television programme. Massimo D'Alema, the leader of the PDS (Partito Democratico della Sinistra), has no response to Berlusconi, which provokes the enraged Moretti to shout at the television screen: 'D'Alema, react, say something, react, say something, answer, say something left-wing, say something even not left-wing, something civilised!'. The phrase not only came to define D'Alema but it has also passed into popular political discourse (Mazierska and Rascaroli 2004: 144).

This article will explore Moretti's significance as a public film-maker who is prepared to repeatedly 'say something left wing'. Concentrating on *Il Caimano* (2006), and on Moretti's more recent films (although reference will be made to his formative features), the article will consider Moretti's films as both media texts/objects in the public sphere, and also as texts that take the media and the public sphere as their object of representation and analysis.

Introduction

As a film-maker who has worked (and continues to work) as an actor, producer, writer and director, while also running his own production and

Keywords

Moretti
auteur
Berlusconi
Il Caimano
cinema
television

- 1 'Moretti is still widely seen as an "autarchic" director – one who has not only "made it" from his position of outsider, but who has also not bought into the system, and has in fact bent it to his will and used it on his own terms' (Mazierska and Rascaroli 2004: 1).

distribution companies, Nanni Moretti is arguably 'the most important Italian filmmaker of the past thirty years' (Mazierska and Rascaroli 2004: 1). As critics have noted, Moretti's

intriguing mix of autarchy and authority, self-sufficiency and power, places [his] cinema simultaneously at the margins and at the centre of contemporary film production, a paradoxical position which perhaps explains the vision that Moretti has of his own filmmaking: 'I am not a director. I am one who makes films when he has something to say'. (Mazierska and Rascaroli 2004: 7)

Moretti has, then, played a significant role in the Italian cinema industry since the release of his first film *Io sono un autarchico/I am Self-Sufficient* in 1977, emerging 'as a somewhat unwilling spokesman for his decidedly disaffected generation' (Porton and Ellickson 1995: 11).¹ Since the release of *Caro Diario/Dear Diary* (1994), he has built up an international reputation with films such as *Aprile* (1998), *La stanza del figlio/The Son's Room* (2001) and most recently *Il Caimano* (2006). In Italy, however, Moretti is also renowned as the originator of the popular phrase 'say something left wing'.

This phrase, 'say something left-wing' comes from a scene in Moretti's 1998 film *Aprile* in which an incredulous Moretti watches Italy's prime minister Silvio Berlusconi denounce the Italian magistracy on a popular current affairs television programme (*Porta a Porta* on RAI1). Massimo D'Alema, the leader of the PDS (Partito Democratico della Sinistra), has no response to Berlusconi, which provokes the enraged Moretti to shout at the television screen: 'D'Alema, react, say something, react, say something, answer, say something left-wing, say something even not left-wing, something civilised!'. This phrase not only came to define D'Alema himself but it has also passed into popular political discourse (Mazierska and Rascaroli 2004: 144).

It is not only in the context of his films, however, that Moretti is prepared to 'say something left-wing'. On Saturday 2 February 2002, at the end of a political rally in the Piazza Navona in Rome, an exasperated Moretti found himself compelled to speak out. The closing formal political addresses of the leaders of the centre-left 'Olive Tree' (*Ulivo*) coalition were preceded by the speeches of a number of non-professionals, writers and intellectuals (e.g. Professor Pardi), who as Moretti describes: 'did not make traditional martial speeches but rather self-critical ones [. . .], which is exactly what I did in my films when I confronted political themes; I mocked the left and criticised it from within' (Gili 2006: 9). Moretti notes that these interventions were well received but that the crowd was astounded by the politicians' speeches that followed, which ignored them entirely. Moretti's brief speech, which created its own far-reaching effects, was a declaration of his dissatisfaction and, as the quote from *Aprile* suggests, his 'desire to react', while also an accusation levelled at the left for underestimating the power of the media to influence political opinion and

of conducting an ineffectual and timid election campaign (Gili 2006: 9; Mazierska and Rascaroli 2004: 115).

Moretti's public expression of his frustration with the left produced an immediate response in the Italian daily newspapers, the suggestion being that he had finally 'let the cat out of the bag'. On Sunday 17th February, Moretti participated in one of the first of many '*girotondi*' protests. These were organized outside of the party political structure and involved the encircling of public buildings, such as the Justice Ministry, symbols of all that seemed to be under threat under Berlusconi's government. Once again Moretti found himself adopting an overt and public political position, the crowd asking him to speak at the close of the meeting. There were numerous protests of this kind throughout the year, culminating in a rally attended by nearly a million people in the Piazza San Giovanni (St. John the Lateran Square) on 14 September 2002.² As Moretti has himself observed: 'after this, if I was a megalomaniac, as many were saying I am, including me, I could have really launched a career as a politician' (Gili 2006: 10). Thus as Mazierska and Rascaroli have noted:

The filmmaker's public outcry [...] was a political speech, which had serious political consequences and also raised noteworthy agreement amongst the public who were present and among the wider electorate of the left. Regardless of the filmmaker's frequent assertions, both in real life and in his films, of being a non-politician or a failed politician [of only speaking through his films], with his speech Moretti *did* politics. (Mazierska and Rascaroli 2004: 117)

Before Moretti's public intervention in the Piazza Navona, he had been working on a documentary on Berlusconi that he then put to one side to concentrate on his 'direct political commitment' (Gili 2006: 10). He was later to write a treatment on Berlusconi that was much more overt than *Il Caimano* but which he remained dissatisfied with; eventually, as Moretti recounts, he was able, with the scriptwriters Federica Pontremoli and Francesco Piccolo, to 'find a less head-on way of talking about Berlusconi and his adventure [*aventure* which can also mean venture in a commercial sense]' (Gili 2006: 10). Much of the criticism levelled at *Il Caimano* on its release was directed precisely at this apparent lack of confrontational engagement with its subject; however, the specific circumstances of the film's emergence (which will be explored later in the article) are crucial to its reception. As both a producer and a director Moretti is well aware who the audience for his films is and refuses to underestimate the intelligence of his spectators, producing in *Il Caimano* a film that while eschewing directness produces a richly complex portrait of contemporary Italian society that in its self-reflexive representational strategy (the attempt to produce a film) damns Berlusconi and the negative impact of his policies (both governmental and corporate). One could perhaps sum up his strategy as follows:

2 For an account of this demonstration, see Willan (2002a).

- 3 Berlusconi is the chairman of AC Milan football club. The party name *Forza Italia*, literally 'Go Italy', was a slogan chanted on the football terraces.
- 4 'Italy is the country I love. Here I have my roots [. . .]. Here I have learned, from my father and from life, how to be an entrepreneur' (Ginsborg 2004: 65).

Being left wing in Italy today means, Moretti suggests, to be indignant in the face of anti-democratic attacks on the independence of the magistrates like the one led by Berlusconi, of the delirious attempts to dismember the Republic, [. . .]; it means not to be 'one of those who believes that people are well, that capitalism is a society that has proved to be able to solve its own contradictions'; it means to be prepared to retell and redescribe the history of one's own community with cruel irony; it means to demystify ideology and authority in all its forms, including one's own; it means to be able to react, to say something, it does not matter if it is left-wing, something civilised is enough. (Mazierska and Rascaroli 2004: 145)

Moretti's public status as a political film-maker has enabled him, then, to become something of an independent political 'agitator', who, incensed by the corruption of the Italian right and dejected by the lassitude of the left, has been able to mobilize resistance to Berlusconi, has been able to proffer to the left-wing a more productive means of describing itself. Moretti's films themselves are engaged in a political and aesthetic critique of contemporary media (both in an Italian context and an international context), but as importantly are concerned to stake out new ways of responding to particular sets of political and social circumstances, are, as Mazierska and Rascaroli have argued, seeking 'to produce new metaphors – new vocabularies to talk about our society – both in terms of cinematic language and of speech at large' (2004: 135).

Il Caimano, Moretti's most recent film, is a film that made a significant contribution to pre-election debate in last year's Italian parliamentary elections (as much by its very existence as by anything that it might have actually said). However, to understand Moretti's latest film, it is necessary to be familiar with recent Italian politics and most crucially with the various conflicts of interest inherent in Silvio Berlusconi's prime ministership of Italy.

Silvio Berlusconi

Berlusconi first took political office in May 1994, having created the political party *Forza Italia* (Go Italy) less than a year previously in November 1993.³ On 26 January 2004, Berlusconi sent a nine-minute video to the Italian state TV channel RAI, to Reuters and to his own three TV channels (Canale 5, Italia 1 and Rete 4), in which he declared his intention to contest the forthcoming elections.⁴ In partnership with the nationalist and fascist-leaning *Alleanza Nazionale* (headed by Gian-Franco Fini) and the separatist Northern League (led by Umberto Bossi) Berlusconi was able to form a right-wing coalition government that lasted until December 1994, defeated ultimately by infighting and the withdrawal of support of the Northern League. During this period, Berlusconi also found himself under investigation on possible charges of corruption by the *mani pulite* or clean hands enquiry.

The period leading up to Berlusconi's election had been one of crisis for the Italian state. In 1992, two key anti-Mafia magistrates – Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino – were assassinated (23 May 1992 and 19

July 1992) in Palermo and the system of *tangente* or bribes that riddled the political economy of Milan, Italy's financial centre, finally became the subject of magisterial investigation. Very quickly *Tangentopoli* (bribesville) or *mani pulite* (clean hands), as this enquiry became known, spread beyond Milan and throughout Italy. This attempt to break the vicious circle of corruption in public life had a profound effect on Italian democracy, producing a crisis in confidence that led to the collapse of two key Italian political parties (the Christian Democrats and the Socialists). Established political figures such as Bettino Craxi (Socialist) and Giulio Andreotti (Christian Democrat) disappeared too, mired in scandal. As an *Observer* report wrote:

The country is in a state of chaos, a state of war. It is fast becoming the banana republic of Europe. It has the highest murder rate in the European Community, the most rampant and blatant corruption, an ailing economy, a floundering government, and an anguished and embarrassed population. (Ginsborg 2003: 263)

As the historian Paul Ginsborg (2004: 62) has noted, the *mani pulite* enquiry had swept away Italy's ruling political parties: 'a great void had been created in the centre of Italian politics, and it was into this space that Silvio Berlusconi stepped'. Central to Berlusconi's electoral success in 1994 was the mobilization of his media empire and as his rapid entry into politics clearly revealed, in Italy, as one commentator succinctly put it, 'television is Berlusconi' (Ginsborg 2004: 33).⁵

Berlusconi may be seen as a kind of father figure in relation to contemporary Italian television (he presents himself as metaphorical father figure for Italy, making overt his pleasure at assuming the position of the patriarchal and arguably paternal leader of Italy), having played a key role in the deregulation of Italian television through his illegal national broadcasts in the late 1970s. Berlusconi and his family own 96 per cent of an unlisted holding company Fininvest, which has a controlling stake in the television company Mediaset, whose three networks have a 43 per cent share of the national audience. Fininvest also controls Mondadori, Italy's largest publishing group, as well as Medusa Video, Blockbuster Italia and a series of major advertising and financial companies.⁶ On his election to his second term of office in May 2001, Berlusconi purged left-wing journalists and executives from the state-owned Rai TV network while at the same time refusing to divest himself of his three television channels, creating a situation in which one individual was effectively in control of over 90 per cent of the television news in Italy (Carroll 2001: 11). Berlusconi stated on his election that rather than sell any part of Fininvest 'his intention [was] to deal with the matter by laying a conflict of interest bill before parliament "by the summer"' (Blitz 2001: 1). By July 2002 this conflict of interest had not been resolved despite the passing of the aforementioned bill. Furthermore in April 2002 Berlusconi consolidated his grip over the Italian media when figures sympathetic to the government were appointed

5 Not only did Berlusconi make use of his ownership of three private television channels (Canale 5, Rete 4 and Italia 1) to further his political ambitions but he also packaged and marketed himself as the embodiment of a specifically Italian version of the American dream; 18 million copies of his 127 page booklet *Una storia italiana/ An Italian Story* were delivered to Italian families in the run up to the May 2001 elections (Ginsborg 2003: 318); a similar publication running to 160 pages and entitled *The Real Italian Story* was produced for the 2006 electoral campaign with copies sent out to 11 million households (see McMahon 2006).

6 Berlusconi owns Publitalia, which controls most of the market in television publicity (Ginsborg 2004: 44–48).

7 'All over the world the relationship between media ownership and political power has been an intimate one. [...] Throughout the 1980s, Thatcher and Murdoch were linked in a close relationship, two faces of the same relentless neoliberal drive towards deregulation and the concentration of power. [...] Israel Asper [...], Canada's senior media tycoon [...] worked closely with Canada's [...] Prime Minister, Jean Chrétien. [...] In France in the 1980s, Robert Hersant, the right-wing owner of a very considerable media empire, courted assiduously both Jacques Chirac and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing' (Ginsborg 2004: 39).

directors of programmes and news at two out of the three RAI networks (Willan 2002b: 1). Despite a court ruling that required him to divest himself of one of his TV channels, Berlusconi's allies voted a communications bill through the lower house of parliament in October 2003 that allowed him to retain them all. Berlusconi, during his term of office, consistently refused to resolve these various conflicts of interest and it is this dangerous proximity between control of the media and direct political power (models of indirect control are common: Murdoch, Asper, Hersant) that Moretti has critiqued in his films.⁷ Thus:

Behind Berlusconi there lurks a central and increasingly dramatic problem for democracy: the relationship between media and politics. [...] We now face a striking paradox – of much less control being exercised by the state at precisely a time when the media system has become much more powerful and all-intrusive. The result is to facilitate the connection of business interests, especially media interests, with the political sphere, and to increase the spaces for manipulation. Nobody knows this better than Silvio Berlusconi. (Ginsborg 2006: 5)

For many critics, including Moretti, Berlusconi's entry into politics was motivated by a desire to escape commercial bankruptcy and personal corruption charges and his five-year period of government was marked by legislation designed to protect Berlusconi's personal and commercial interests. Moretti dramatizes these aspects of Berlusconi's biography in *Il Caimano*.

Il Caimano

Il Caimano charts the attempts of a has-been producer of B-movie genre films (with wonderful titles such as *Killer Mocassins* and *Maciste vs Freud*), Bruno Bonomo (played by Silvio Orlando) to finance an ongoing project, 'The Return of Christopher Columbus'. As the opening parody, 'Cataracts', finishes and the camera pulls back to reveal Bruno at a retrospective of his films, we witness him being handed the script for a film, 'Il Caimano' by Teresa (Jasmine Trinca), a passionate but young and inexperienced director of short films. It is quickly evident that Bruno's professional and personal life is in a mess – he is on the brink of bankruptcy and separated from his former actress wife Paola (played by Margherita Buy). After the director of his Columbus costume drama deserts him, taking the film to a rival producer, Bruno decides, without having read the script in full, to produce Teresa's 'Il Caimano'. Imagining the film to be some kind of thriller – 'when did you last see a helicopter in an Italian movie' he says to one potential backer – it is only on the way to a finance meeting at RAI (Italian state television) that Bruno realizes, in conversation with Teresa, that the film is actually about Silvio Berlusconi, that he is the caiman of the title. Against the backdrop of his relationship with his two young sons and the disintegration of his marriage, Bruno presses ahead with 'Il Caimano', recruiting a famous actor, Marco Pulici (played by actor-director

Michele Placido) to play the role of Berlusconi (one of four ‘actors’, including Berlusconi, to appear as him in the film), after having unsuccessfully approached actor-director Nanni Moretti. It is on the strength of Pulici’s involvement that the film is funded and so when he betrays Bruno, out of fear for his reputation, to play the lead in ‘The Return of Christopher Columbus’, Bruno’s film can no longer survive; however in a gesture of defiance he decides to film one final scene: the judgement and sentencing of Berlusconi by the Italian courts. Confounding expectation, Moretti himself plays Berlusconi, producing at this point as Moretti himself has argued, a kind of *mise en abyme* where Teresa’s film and Moretti’s film merge:

The idea was to effect a reversal and to play the role without caricaturing Berlusconi, while trying to recreate for the spectator something of what occurred during those years; the gravity and the extent of the damage (ethical, constitutional, psychological) to the culture, the economy is perhaps still to be fully grasped. (Gili 2006: 12)

Moretti’s *Il Caimano* clearly taps into an important debate in Italy, and Europe more broadly, regarding the convergence of the media and politics, as the account of Berlusconi’s position has illustrated. Moretti’s film dramatizes the dangers inherent in the excessive proximity between them – both *literally* in terms of what is seen of Berlusconi in the film but also *figuratively* in terms of what is not seen of the actual film *Il Caimano* within Moretti’s film; the film that couldn’t be made because of the media power of Berlusconi. Moretti himself, of course, wields a degree of media power – albeit on a miniscule scale compared with Berlusconi’s media empire, but he can nonetheless make front-page news with his films and with his political arguments and can as such make his voice heard and contribute actively to debate, unlike most of the mass consumers of Berlusconi’s TV stations. Although it is clearly too simplistic to see these consumers as simply passive, nonetheless the fact that private television is owned in Italy by a hyper-rich individual broadcasting primarily to his social opposites might suggest that ‘they are those who are most likely to respond positively to the “preferred reading” of the messages encoded in media texts’ (Ginsborg 2004: 105).

Television, as the critic and historian Pierre Sorlin has asserted, has played a significant role in Italian political and social life since the late 1970s (1996: 145), becoming ‘the only daily “cultural” activity of the average Italian family’ (Ginsborg 2004: 50). As Paul Ginsborg has noted:

the commercial television system which Berlusconi built up [. . .] was to have a conspicuous effect upon the cultural life of the nation [. . .]. On Berlusconi’s channels there was a lot of entertainment but little room for the real world. (2004: 40, 44)

As the case of Berlusconi and contemporary Italian politics has made abundantly clear: ‘the logic of democratic politics and the logic of television

8 "The moment of truth will be the spring of 2006, the date of the next national elections. If Berlusconi wins again, there can be no doubt that he will establish a fully fledged politico-media regime in the heart of Europe. At stake, therefore, is the future of one of Europe's wealthiest and most important countries' (Ginsborg 2004: 182–83).

9 See Sutton (2004).

make uneasy companions' (Ginsborg 2004: 103).⁸ Moretti's acute awareness of the proximate relationship between film and television is exploited to great critical effect in his films, at the level of the image in *Aprile* and overtly in *Il Caimano* through the demonstration of cinema's political and affective power, as evidenced by the film's powerful final sequence.⁹ The film's finale functions as a warning of the dangers of the caiman, Berlusconi, who when sentenced to jail for corruption incites, via the television, anti-judicial rioting. On the question of whether Moretti thought that the events that we see at the end of the film could actually occur should Berlusconi win the April 2006 elections, Moretti said:

It's a metaphor. Ultimately, we should remember that when Berlusconi expresses himself, when he addresses people, he does it also and above all via his television channels. As such this gives him power and superiority in respect of these spectators. Television is an instrument that is familiarly arrogant or arrogantly familiar. Thus, through television, certain things can be made to happen, that with other modes of communication cannot occur so easily. (Gili 2006: 13)

Television in *Il Caimano* is associated directly with Berlusconi whose success both as Italy's wealthiest self-made (business)man and prime minister (at the time of the film's production and release) is based upon it. *Il Caimano* dramatizes the conflict between film and television that exists in Italian society. Moretti may be seen as the guardian of film and film culture, subject (in his view) to relentless erosion from television represented by its most powerful figure Berlusconi. Television is associated with corruption, film with critical integrity. The simplicity of this opposition obscures the fact that the two remain very closely interrelated in Italy (stylistically as well as financially) as they are in the rest of Europe; nonetheless there is no doubt that the *Il Caimano* succeeds in offering an effective critique of the circumstances and effects of that relationship in and for Italian television and Italian culture and society more broadly. Thus Teresa's 'Il Caimano' can only be made outside of the reach of television (even RAI refuses support) and yet Moretti's film also demonstrates clearly the difficulties inherent in such independence. As Moretti himself argues:

Effectively, Berlusconi has already won after thirty years of television. Something took place in the minds of people during those years and it is not the victory hoped for by the centre left which would put things back to how they were: we need tens and tens of years. The pact/treaty on which this democracy, the Italian Constitution was founded, combined with our non-rhetorical anti-fascism (given that in Italy fascism actually existed) has, during the past twelve years, been shattered into a thousand pieces. I'm not only talking about anti-fascism but about values that ought to be shared by all. In a democracy we can be divided over various political projects but certain values must be common to the progressives and to the traditionalists. For twelve years this has not been the case in Italy. (Gili 2006: 12)

Il Caimano was released in Italy on 24 March 2006, just two weeks ahead of the Italian elections of 8th–9th April. Unsurprisingly, the film was met with hostility from the right and it provoked considerable debate within the Italian media; however, at least one critic has pointed out that ‘no doubt because Berlusconi lost, *The Caiman* has scarcely been shown outside Italy’ (Hooper 2006: 2). Despite the film’s prominence on the front pages of many of Italy’s daily papers, it was only covered on two of the national television channels, with the Berlusconi friendly TG2 hiding behind Italy’s *par condicio* law, which requires equality on political reporting during elections.¹⁰ Response to the film in the United Kingdom was mixed with a number of commentators suggesting that the film was something of a missed opportunity:

If only Nanni Moretti had the strength and clarity of purpose to make a film about Silvio Berlusconi. Instead he has made a film about a film about Silvio Berlusconi [. . .] All the way through, I was longing for Moretti to grasp the subject of Berlusconi, to tackle this great Italian and European scandal head on and say something, anything, about it with passion and directness. Instead, we are always veering off into the wacky world of Bruno and his chaotic personal and professional life, which is sometimes funny and sometimes not. (Bradshaw 2006: 2)

The above critique of Moretti’s film concerns its imbrication of the personal and the political; however, this is in many ways one of the key strengths of the film because the subject at its heart is precisely the relationship between the two, not only in terms of the idea that all is political but also in terms of Berlusconi himself as a wealthy private individual seeking to govern the state in a similar fashion to the way in which he runs his corporate enterprise (as well as his attempts to escape the personal implications of his corporate corruption through the passing of public laws that serve his personal interest, the so-called *leggi ad personam* or self-serving laws). Perhaps one can think here in terms of two types of (media) politician – the aggressive, singular, self-confident and dangerous Berlusconi and the benign, complex and self-critical Moretti – both are ‘screen’ politicians but in very different ways and in very different media (and ultimately with different degrees of power).

Moretti’s apparent failure to ‘grasp the subject of Berlusconi’ might result also from the fact that in Italy any kind of direct approach was especially difficult while Berlusconi remained in power. With his direct control over the bulk of private television and indirect power in relation to state television he was able to censor voices of dissension. One striking example was the cancellation of Sabina Guzzanti’s television series *RAIot* after one episode, which became the subject of her incisive documentary *Viva Zapatero!* (2005); in addition there is the example of the so-called Sofia edict (Berlusconi’s public denunciation and subsequent censoring of three journalists and satirists).¹¹ One of the most worrying aspects of the

10 See McMahon (2006a) for an account of Berlusconi’s attempts to subvert this law himself. As one critic has pointed out Moretti’s film ‘about Berlusconi fell prey to the Berlusconiisation of the Italian media’ (Marshall 2006: 22).

11 Guzzanti’s approach is very different to that of Moretti and is closer to Michael Moore’s documentary style. The journalists in question were the journalists Biagi and Santoro and the satirist Lutazzi.

Guzzanti example, and it emerges in her film, is the extent to which the left chose to not support her. More insidious, however, for Moretti (and this forms part of the subject matter of his film) is the extent to which the minds of Italians have become immune to Berlusconi. Thus as one rather more positive view of the film has argued:

Given the strength of Moretti's moral indignation and the depth of his political opposition to Berlusconi, one might have expected *Il Caimano* to be a passionate *j'accuse*, albeit served up in fictional sauce. In a way it is, though the accusation is directed not only at Berlusconi himself but at the Italy that elected him and the Italy that has been remade in his image. (Marshall 2006: 22)

However, given that the film presents us with a total of four Berlusconis, it may well be that Moretti's film recognizes the impossibility of approaching Berlusconi directly; in other words not only are there different versions of him but 'there's also the suspicion that the real man might be all surface, that there might be nothing to grasp' (Marshall 2006: 23). To put it another way, Berlusconi is perhaps a version of the Lacanian real for the Italian people that 'persists as a surplus, and returns through all attempts [. . .] to dissolve it by means of explication' (Žižek 1989: 69). Power over representation is at the very heart of Moretti's film, evident not only in the making of the film within the film, the exploration of Berlusconi's relationship with the media, the state and politics but embedded also in the personal relationships that exist in the film. The most notable example here is contained in the Lego search motif; on at least two occasions, Bruno's sons are engaged with adult helpers in seeking out a single, specific piece of Lego from a mass of pieces. In the context of the separation of their parents, it seems clear that the Lego piece is intended to function much like the celebrated cotton reel in Freud's account of the *fort/da* game. One review of *Il Caimano* has drawn attention to this particular motif, arguing that Moretti's own appearance and disappearance in the film is similarly structured:

In one sense *Il Caimano* is one big *fort/da* game, in which Moretti himself is the peek-a-boo cotton reel. In the first half of the film he is hiding; then he appears briefly, but as an anti-Moretti, a defeatist, canting parody of himself. He disappears once more, to return at the end as Silvio Berlusconi, the ultimate anti-Moretti. In giving himself to us, the director is denying himself. He is here but not here, refusing to inhabit his own skin. (Marshall 2006: 24)

While one might share this view, it might also be argued that the same structure operates in relation to the appearances of Berlusconi (in any of his four guises in the film). Moretti plays a game with *Il Caimano*'s spectators – perhaps in relation to his own appearance and disappearance – but also perhaps in terms of Berlusconi's presence as an object of criticism in

the film. The reviews that wished that Moretti would tackle Berlusconi 'head-on' fail to recognize the futility/impossibility of such an approach. To refract Berlusconi through the film as a quasi-representational object (only occasionally glimpsed directly) allows Moretti to multiply this figure through an entire network of connections and relationships across the entire film. Of course, the *fort/da* game is ultimately concerned with the 'game' of representation, with mastery and the attempt to wield power over representation. Moretti, by playing a dangerous representational 'game' across his film, reveals the extent to which this game itself is what is at stake in relation to his film, to Berlusconi and to contemporary Italian society.

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The movie *Pinocchio* by Roberto Benigni and its reception in the United States

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Abstract

Roberto Benigni's movie Pinocchio, released in 2002 and Italian candidate for the 2003 Oscars, opened in the United States to a barrage of almost unanimously negative criticism, ranging from condescending reprimands to open insults of the same director and actor who had recently given such clear proof of his capacity and talent in the Oscar-winning La vita è bella. This article argues that this response is based on a political and economic agenda that promotes cultural homogenization as a means of supporting the globalization of the contemporary world, which is its acceptance of the American economic, social and cultural model. The film is presented with a discussion on its role in a programmatic cultural discourse that, while opposing such globalization, supports and encourages locality and nationality in an effort to overcome local and national barriers.

Keywords

Pinocchio
Benigni
globalization
American film critics
Ceserani
Forrest Gump

In the cinematic world, winning an Oscar is neither easy nor easily accounted for, the path leading to it being paved with so many good intentions by so many good people. There are an unspecified but certainly huge number of factors, facts and factoids that the unsparing juries take into consideration when deciding which movie or movie component (from director to actor, to script etc.) will be honoured. We will not attempt to identify the concoction of factors that prompted the various juries to award Benigni's *La vita è bella/Life is Beautiful* (Benigni, 1997) the prizes it has so far received.¹ We can only observe that, although several critics condemned the lightness with which Benigni constructed images of the Holocaust, many were able to see that

Benigni has constructed a work of fiction which contains the recognizable elements of a classic fairy tale: the princess, the prince on a white horse, the forbidden love and the evil monster. The originality of Benigni's film consists not in tackling the evil of Nazism, but in portraying Nazism as the evil monster of his fairy tale. (Ghonaim 1988)

If it is true, as we think it is, that one of the factors taken into account by the juries when evaluating a movie is the quality of its content as judged by both aesthetic and ethical criteria, then we might argue that a movie depicting Nazism as an evil monster – and thus justifying and glorifying

- 1 To list just a few, it was the winner of the Grand Jury Prize at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival, the Best Jewish Experience Award at the 1999 Jerusalem International Film Festival, the recipient of eight David di Donatello Awards (the Italian Oscars) including Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Director and Best Screenplay, and it famously dominated the 2000 Oscars (Best Actor, Best Director and Best Music Score).

- 2 The movie received six nominations for the 23rd Razzie Awards in 2002: Worst Picture, Worst Actor (Benigni), Worst Screen Couple, Worst Director, Worst Remake, Worst Screenplay. It was only awarded the Golden Raspberry for Worst Actor (Wilson 2003).
- 3 Among them Andrea Piersanti and Francesco Bolzoni, who wrote respectively: 'Benigni's performance alone is worth the ticket price. However we would be happy to pay even more because this film offers the pleasures of an evergreen magic fairy tale that Benigni, more and more Pinocchio, offers to the public with sincere passion. Against the lies and the temptations of our busy lifestyles, Benigni proposes a truth that comes from the heart and leads us to the way of redemption. Life is beautiful, really beautiful, Roberto-Pinocchio insists in this movie' (Piersanti 2002: 39–40); 'Benigni truly succeeds in giving us back, on the big screen, Collodi's masterpiece (. . .) I was happily surprised to see how naturally Benigni and the other actors, all from different acting schools, are in tune with that special Tuscan *aura*, so typical of the beautiful and moral tale narrated in the film. In this sense the friendship between Pinocchio and Lucignolo is

the heavy-handed intervention of the American military apparatus, which culminated in Hiroshima and Nagasaki when the European monster was already dead – has a good chance of being viewed with a benevolent eye, especially by a jury of American citizens at a point in time when the US administration was desperately trying to find the impossible: moral justification for its policy of imposing political and economic control on the world by adopting a terrorist strategy that finds its principles, justification and power in the curative released on the Japanese monster.

We are not saying that *Life is Beautiful* was awarded Oscars for political reasons and that it would not otherwise have won; on the contrary, we think that those Oscars were well deserved and that the movie's representation of Nazism as a bogeyman was just one element contributing to the jury's decision. By the same token, we will not now argue that the movie *Pinocchio* (Benigni, 2002) was critically attacked, thrashed and received no awards (other than the infamous Golden Raspberry Awards) just because it proposes a discourse that promotes cultural diversity rather than the global homogenization of culture that the US ruling classes, helped by the ruling classes of most Western and many non-Western countries, have been promoting for years.² We think that that condition is one of the many that the movie did not meet to be well received in the American market.

It must be said that in Italy too the critics' reactions were mixed: although a few gave very positive reviews, many were lukewarm or even negative. However the comments and judgments expressed were for the most part supported by a relatively serious attempt to analyse and understand the movie and its context. Catholic critics expressed loud and clear their admiration for the movie,³ but then again Catholic intellectuals have always appreciated the novel written by Carlo Lorenzini under the pen name Collodi, *Le avventure di Pinocchio: Storia di un burattino/The Adventures of Pinocchio: Story of a Puppet* (Collodi, 1986), a classic of Italian literature, and a major one at that, of which Benigni's movie can be considered a relatively respectful adaptation, however defined.⁴ Over the years there have been various positive interpretations of the book that saw a close analogy between the story of Pinocchio and that of Jesus Christ (Biffi 1977; Pierotti 1981). However approval for the movie was not limited to Catholic circles and many other critics expressed their appreciation, even the authoritative cinema scholar Gian Piero Brunetta.⁵

Nevertheless most of the other Italian reviewers, while recognizing the excellence of both settings and photography, criticized the movie on three main counts, all of which are enunciated in the review by Piero Cudini, professor of Italian literature at Italy's most prestigious university, the *Scuola Normale* of Pisa. Although irritated by the massive media campaign that preceded its release, Cudini nonetheless went to see the movie but found it tedious. He concluded that not only was Benigni just an 'illustrator', rather than an 'interpreter', of Collodi's masterpiece, but he had also disregarded two paramount elements of the book. Firstly, while Collodi represents Pinocchio's initiation into the adult world of hard labour, Benigni's

Pinocchio avoids this and manages to keep life joyful and easygoing. Secondly, the Collodian Tuscany with its acute and endemic poverty is transformed by Benigni into a vision of Tuscany as seen in advertisements sponsored by the Tourist Board. The third point is Benigni's acting: Cudini found Benigni's portrayal of a puppet unconvincing, with its reliance on simply 'continuously, repetitively (boringly, that is) laughing, jumping, running and talking in a falsetto voice' (Cudini 2002). This is clearly the opinion of a scholar of high culture, which, as we all know, by definition is never illustrative and repetitive but always interpretive and original. Paradoxically this same criticism is found in reviews by a crowd of popular culture critics who also lamented the 'illustrative' quality of Benigni's work (perhaps forgetting that Cudini's idea of art might not coincide with theirs) and especially lamented that his Pinocchio was too tame, too quick to learn his lesson and become a good boy. Many of these critics were fans of the Benigni *persona*, as it were, that persona which until then had been interpreted by Benigni in all his various performances, both as a stand-up comedian and as a movie actor, a persona known for his laughter, his unpredictable and irrepressible gestures, his ability to weave together nonsense and profound philosophical thought, his irreverence.⁶

The basis for these reactions can be found in the genealogy of the movie itself, in expectations fulfilled or otherwise, and in the political situation in which the movie appeared. Indeed the movie was launched in Hollywood style, with merchandising galore – reprints of Collodi's *Pinocchio*, T-shirts, dolls, puppets and promotions at McDonald's. The decision to give the distribution rights to the company Medusa, owned by right-wing premier Mr. Berlusconi, was severely criticized by all those who until then had admired Benigni's long-standing and open hostility towards Mr. Berlusconi. Of course, the question arose as to whether the choice of distribution company also influenced the content of the movie. With a budget of 45 million euros (according to the Benigni family-owned production company), *Pinocchio* is the most expensive Italian film ever made. However, the merchandising campaign and massive distribution by Medusa (some 960 copies of the movie were made so that it could be shown simultaneously all over Italy) helped to ensure the movie broke all box-office records in its opening week, generating 26 million euros. No matter what the critics said, Italian children loved it; whether they were induced to do so by Mr. Berlusconi's television advertising campaign is not relevant here.

We mentioned that Collodi's *Le avventure di Pinocchio* is one of the major classics of Italian literature and as such has generated many readings and interpretations that have tried to uncover the secret of the book's success with young and adult readers alike. On one point all critics agree: *Le avventure di Pinocchio* is not a fairy tale – or, at least, it is not *just* a fairy tale. Certainly many of its *topoi*, its characters, its axiological models, even its narrative tone, have their roots in the tradition of fairy tales. However *Pinocchio* is also a novel, that is, a long narration, with its world and its geography, its system of characters and its ideological model. It is a

particularly beautiful' (Bolzoni 2002).

- 4 A story that appeared in serialized form between 1881 and 1883 in the *Giornale per i bambini*, one of Italy's first periodicals for children. It enjoyed immediate and ever-increasing popularity as a book for children, but it was only forty-odd years later that it began to be appreciated by the literary critics. It was probably the most widely read literary text among Italians in the twentieth century. Beyond Italy, it is the most widely known of Italian books, even more so than Dante's *Divine Comedy*.
- 5 He wrote in his *Guide to the History of Italian Cinema. 1905–2003*: '*Pinocchio* by Benigni is the most sincere homage ever paid to the teaching and the spirit of Fellini (. . .) in this movie the motivation comes from the heart; the deep commitment and love of Benigni for the puppet appear to be more important than the economic stimuli' (Brunetta 2003: 321). Also Paola Daniela Orlandini, writing on *Tempi Moderni*, a 'secular' periodical, favorably impressed: 'An opulent and phantasmagoric visual experience. In Benigni's film the precision of the details, the beauty of the set created by the lamented Danilo Donati, should be enough – even without special effects – to make this *Pinocchio* interesting, precisely because it

follows a completely different direction from that of the TV movie by Comencini. The latter expressive style, based on subtraction and a neorealism that was poor in everything but emotions, is substituted by the abundance of illustration and imagination' (Orlandini 2002). See also the positive reviews by Paola Torino (2004), Matteo Grandi (2002), Paola Galgani (2003) and Germana Bertamini (2002).

- 6 For example, Emanuela Martini entitles her review, 'Benigni becomes a prisoner of the wooden puppet and doesn't succeed in having his persona vibrate' (2002). The well-known writer Aldo Busi gives a similar opinion and expresses it in his characteristically metaphoric language by saying: 'The movie is like cotton candy (. . .) there is something in this Pinocchio that enervates me (exhausts me), in fact it tries to stun (daze) me . . . to thunder strike me? . . . to scare me and reduce me to a better behaviour with . . . what shall I say? . . . with power, that's it' (2002). Comparable observations have been made by Vincenzo Sangiorgio (2002), Roberto Fedi (2002) and Alberto Crespi (2002), among others.

- 7 For example, although Pinocchio's final metamorphosis entails a clear change

narration that focuses on the life experiences of its main character: his attempts at integration into a system that rejects him, the ongoing and painful acquisition of knowledge and experience. It is not strictly speaking an apprenticeship novel, nor is it an adventure or picaresque novel, let alone a realistic novel. And of course it is not the sum of all these subgenres. Yet along with the fairy tale elements, there are in *Le avventure di Pinocchio* enough elements of these subgenres to simultaneously permit different readings.⁷ We agree with Carlo Alberto Madrignani when he points out that

The book is strongly dependant on non official cultural forms, both oral and theatrical, that were rooted in the Tuscan region. Thus its symbolism is completely popular and secular, with thoughts and images of death which are external to the range of traditional religious values. Its popular realism allows, licenses, as it were, so the story can have fantastic and magic elements, but it has to stick to everyday reality. That is why at the end of its adventures the extraordinary puppet cannot but follow the most common social code. (Madrignani 1981: 141)

And also with Remo Ceserani who states that

The more we found the roots of Pinocchio's story in the deep anthropological structure of the collective imagination of rural Tuscany in the second half of the 1800s and the connections it has with the realistic literature of the time, the richer in meanings and suggestions that story becomes not only for Italian readers but also for readers belonging to different historical moments and cultures'. (Ceserani and De Federicis 1979: 832)

It is clear from Benigni's book, *Io un po' Pinocchio/Myself a little bit like Pinocchio* (Benigni, 2002) that he was not only very conscious of the universal appeal of Collodi's book, but also of the five-hour television movie *Le avventure di Pinocchio/The Adventures of Pinocchio* (Comencini, 1972), a masterpiece directed by Luigi Comencini, one of Italy's most renowned film directors. The success of Comencini's film lay in its combination of fantastic and realistic tones, well grounded in the social and rural landscape of the second half of the nineteenth century. Comencini only partially sacrifices the fantastic elements in favour of the social realism that characterizes his adaptation. His Pinocchio is played by a real child who, in a society comprising mainly poor people but also including a few arrogant, powerful ones, just wants to be free; he does not recognize or understand the sacrifices made by those who want to help him to become a good boy. Thus he is sometimes turned back into a puppet as punishment until the final transformation when he agrees to live by the rules of society. Comencini's movie, made in the early 1970s, reflects the anti-authoritarian elements that characterized the previous decade of social protest and highlights the moments of disrespect towards authority. Benigni knew that this

movie, so popular with its audience, was still in the minds of most Italians. So he decided to follow Comencini's lead by staying close to the original and, in particular, retaining the Tuscan elements (e.g. the scenes that were not shot in a studio were filmed in the very recognizable Tuscan countryside, the actors – Benigni in particular – spoke with thick Tuscan accents), while at the same time giving his own interpretation of the story. Indeed his movie closely follows Collodi's novel. However, the script, which Benigni co-wrote with Vincenzo Cerami (with whom he also co-wrote *Life is Beautiful*), contains a few innovations which of course give an interpretation of Collodi's book, which is entirely original. One of the most notable of these elements is that the puppet is played by Benigni himself and this choice of course influenced the whole rendering of the story. For example, all of the other children in the movie are also played by adults.

However, the main development of the plot is followed in the movie and the puppet Pinocchio, characterized by naughtiness, petulance, arrogance, egocentrism, but at the same time fundamentally good, goes through a series of misadventures and eventually learns to take responsibility for his own actions, for which he is rewarded by being turned into a real-live boy. But Cerami and Benigni devised an ending that gives the whole parable a different meaning. The original ended with Pinocchio, now a real-live boy, looking at the puppet, saying 'How funny I was when I was a puppet and how happy I am now that I am a good boy' (Collodi 1986: 257). In the movie, after this scene, we see Pinocchio being sent to school by Gepetto; he actually enters the schoolhouse diligently, but his shadow, which doesn't correspond to his new form, but to that of the puppet, does not follow Pinocchio into school; rather, it dashes off to follow the same butterfly that recurs throughout the movie as a symbol of his *joie de vivre*.

Pinocchio is represented in Collodi's book and Benigni's movie as a typical and eternal urchin, a youth whose main characteristic is neither his nastiness nor his malice, but his 'lightness', in the sense of his lack of responsibility, his inability to calculate the significance and consequences of his own actions. In other words, he is a youngster who yields to his desires without reflection.

All of Pinocchio's defects and wrongdoings derive from his attempts to protect his freedom to satisfy his desires. This is why he is a liar; this is why he is stubborn and obstinate when he makes mistakes. However the story of Pinocchio's expiation and redemption revolves around the motif of the 'good heart'. Pinocchio is a rascal; he is wilful, arrogant, irresponsible – but he is also good. For example, when the puppet master threatens Arlecchino, he defends his friend at great risk to his own life. The motif of the 'good heart' permeates the entire culture of post-unification Italy. It is seen as a final bastion against the explosion of what we might call 'an irresistible national irrationality' – that is, a tendency to divide what had just been brought together. It was during those years that Edmondo De Amicis wrote the book *Cuore/Heart* (2003) that until recently constituted – along with *Pinocchio* – almost compulsory reading for Italian children. *Heart* was

of social status, we can say that a desire to climb the social ladder is not one of Pinocchio's aspirations throughout the novel. In fact the prime motivation behind his actions is the immediate satisfaction of his desires. Like a character from a picaresque novel, who lurches from one adventure to another seeking to fill his stomach, Pinocchio does the same to satisfy his desires.

intended to teach Italians how to become Italian through the promotion of 'good intentions'. However, while in *Heart* there are no contradictions between its various components – the political, the social, the cultural and the ideal – in *Pinocchio* the situation is more complex and many social institutions are attacked (education, law); only the institution of the family avoids condemnation. In Benigni's *Pinocchio* all these aspects are highlighted; nonetheless the American critics and reporters saw fit only to bash the more superficial aspects of the movie.

The attack began with an influential article by Elvis Mitchell published in *The New York Times* on the 26 December 2002. In his review, instead of trying to understand the movie as a whole, Mitchell isolates single scenes and elements of the movie and describes them with an air of affected puzzlement. He identifies himself as a provincial, middle-class American, as someone who doesn't understand what he is seeing; but he describes what he has seen in such a way as to render it as absurd and horrid as possible. In other words, he doesn't attempt a serious critique of the movie, preferring to simply throw mud.

In this enchanted setting, 'a land where grown-ups can act like children,' a magic log falls off a cart and disrupts an entire tiny town. It bounces into Geppetto's home-workshop, and he quickly says, 'You can be like the son I never had' as he carves it into his idea of a little boy. I guess Geppetto doesn't get out much, because his idea of a child is a 40-ish man with a receding hairline, pancake makeup and 5 o'clock shadow: the Pinocchio he fashions is Mr. Benigni (. . .) a picture that is mostly a desert of strangeness, a movie so bad that it quickly enters the pantheon of wreckage that includes *Battleship Earth* and *Showgirls*. (. . .) Geppetto encourages Pinocchio to go to school, but he's not interested. When he is visited by a talking insect named Cricket, who must have danced over from the magical land of copyright infringement, Pinocchio blathers, 'One job I want: the job of eating, drinking and playing'. (. . .) It's an oddity that will be avoided by millions of people, this new *Pinocchio*. Osama bin Laden could attend a showing in Times Square and be confident of remaining hidden. (Mitchell 2002)

His review alternates between open insults and bewildered descriptions laden with irony, then ends with an open invitation to shun the movie, reinforced by a dubious joke referring to today's incarnation of America's public enemy number one. He is obviously referring to low ticket sales but it is almost as if he is accusing any American who attends the movie of high treason. After such a high example of film criticism, a disproportionately large herd of American film critics couldn't but follow suit; in fact they tried hard to outdo Elvis Mitchell. Two such examples are Leydon (2002) and Hewitt (2002). In most of them there are references to Benigni's receding hairline to illustrate one of the major perceived defects of the movie: the actor's age and the presumption that the audience will be unable (or unwilling) to suspend disbelief. However this seems to be a

superficial and cheap cover to mask an aversion to the movie that is based on different and maybe less acceptable motivations, especially for a supposedly open-minded critic. One need only consider the enthusiastic response to the movie *Big* (Marshall 1988), starring Tom Hanks, by both audiences and reviewers. In this film, a remake of the Italian *Da Grande/When I'll be a Grown-up* (Amurri 1987), 12-year-old Josh from suburban New Jersey is fed up with being small so he asks a wishing machine to make him big. His wish comes true and he finds himself in the body of a 25-year-old man (Tom Hanks). The rest of the film deals with the adventures of big Josh, whose brain and personality are still those of small Josh, in his search for the wishing machine so it can return him to his normal size. Although the adult world he enters during these adventures offers many pleasures, it is the pleasures of childhood that he chooses when he eventually finds the wishing machine.

For the US audience, who made this movie a box office success, and critics (Brussat and Brussat 1988; MacPherson 2000; Null 2006), 30-something Hanks playing a 12-year-old was not a problem whatsoever. In fact: 'The movie is much more than an exercise in slapstick or farce: it is really a disquisition on the wonder of childhood (. . .) might very well be destined to become a classic' (Ruplenas 2000). Hanks was nominated for Best Actor in the Oscars for his body transference performance; had he not been up against Dustin Hoffman's superb interpretation in *Rain Man* (Levinson, 1988) he might well have won. However the Academy Award for Best Actor was bestowed on Hanks for *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis, 1994). In this movie, he plays a role that, in a sense, might also belong to the body transference genre: he is a 'semi-retarded' individual from a small town in a southern US state, to whom a series of incredible, or at least implausible, things happen. In this tale, Hanks' character undergoes what might be described as a series of metamorphoses. He overcomes polio in a miraculous scene then goes on to become a professional football player, then a Vietnam war hero, a champion ping-pong player, a running guru, a millionaire, a benefactor and the father of an intelligent child. The American public and critics had no problem swallowing with pleasure such a bittersweet version of the American dream, notwithstanding that this fairy tale required a strong and willing suspension of disbelief. The point is that Benigni's receding hairline is no more implausible for a puppet than what happens to Forrest is for any American man, let alone one who is not so smart. What makes Forrest's story acceptable is that in spite of some superficial social criticism it is a glorification of American capitalism (Kleeves 1999).

We have not picked these two Tom Hanks movies at random from the immense corpus of the body-transference genre; rather, they are relevant also because Benigni makes direct reference to *Forrest Gump* in his *Pinocchio*. It is not only that Benigni's *Pinocchio* appears to be following the advice of Forrest's friend Jenny when she says, 'Run, Forrest, run!' which is a leit-motif in Zemeckis' film. In fact, Benigni's *Pinocchio* took the motif of running directly from Collodi. The reference to *Forrest Gump* is much more precise: the feather that starts and ends Zemeckis' film is repeated as a

8 As defined by John Zimmermann: 'Celebrity performers are actors (...) that play characters across many roles (...) Tom Cruise always plays a character I think of as "the best" (...) Tom Hanks offers a similar example – almost always playing an ordinary guy who experiences extraordinary events (...) he is an ordinary kid who suddenly becomes an adult in *Big* (...) he is an ordinary man of limited intelligence who leads an extraordinary life in *Forrest Gump* (...) (Zimmerman 2003: 11).

9 Pete Croatto's comments, for example, are quite explicit: 'It's been about 20 years and some 130 pounds since I saw Disney's cartoon version of Pinocchio (based on Carlo Collodi's book). Though much has happened in that time, I remember adoring that movie. I also remember the lovable puppet not having a receding hairline, as well as not feeling like I was watching a community theatre production (...) Here, Pinocchio is a jerk. And what's worse, he's rewarded for being a jerk. The movie lets him get away with seemingly everything but murder. He skips school, disrespects his elders, acts selfishly and generally makes a nuisance of himself (...) Even when Pinocchio eventually becomes flesh and bone, he's unjustifiably

narrative visual technique in the blue butterfly that opens and closes Benigni's movie. It is true that the blue butterfly, unlike the feather, also appears elsewhere in the movie; and it is also true that, while the blue butterfly seems to us to be a symbol of the *joie de vivre* that characterizes Pinocchio, the feather, in Robert Zemeckis' words, was intended to be 'a metaphor for the randomness of life and the destiny of life. The destiny in that it lands on Forrest's foot and the randomness as it could land anywhere as it lands on that other guy's shoulder' (Zemeckis, 1994). However the blue butterfly is such a striking quotation of *Forrest Gump*'s feather – so much so that some Italian critics called it 'embarrassing' (Fedi 2002) – that we cannot but see it as an homage by Benigni to Zemeckis and especially to Hanks as a celebrity performer.⁸ Benigni too sees himself as a celebrity performer and the character he personifies is that of Pinocchio:

I have always done Pinocchio, in everything I did. *Il piccolo diavolo/The Little Devil* (Benigni, 1988) was Pinocchio, Walter Matthau was Geppetto completely. He was just a Geppetto. And there was also the Blue Fairy who was there as Nicoletta Braschi. I have always run after Pinocchio. At the end of the day, even *The Monster* (Benigni, 1994) was him, and so was *Johnny Stecchino* (Benigni, 1991), and a little Pinocchio was the character of *Life is Beautiful*. (Grieco 2002)

We agree with Benigni's self-portrait and would add that he was also Pinocchio as Mario Cioni in Bertolucci's *Berlinguer ti voglio bene/I Love You Berlinguer* (Bertolucci, 1977), as Bob in Jim Jarmush's cult movie *Down by Law* (Jarmush, 1986) as Ivo Salvini in Fellini's last movie, *La voce della luna/Voice of the Moon* (Fellini, 1990). And who can fail to see the similarity between Benigni's performance on the night he won the Oscars for *Life is Beautiful*, when he climbed over the audience's seats to reach the stage, and the scene at the puppets' theatre when Pinocchio is summoned by the other puppets?

Thus it seems quite peculiar that the American critics were expecting from Benigni a different Pinocchio. For most of these reporters, Kevin Thomas (2003), Edward Guthmann (2002), Jennie Punter (2002) and Jay Boyar (2002) among others, the story of Pinocchio as told by Benigni was too strange and too difficult to relate to. In the first place it was too different from Walt Disney's sentimentalized and simplified *Pinocchio* (Disney, 1940) or the condensed versions of the story that are thought more suitable for children in the United States.⁹ Disney wanted to give the story a more universal flavour to make it a viable commercial product. So he had his collaborators remove every sign of local culture and local folklore. Thus all references to the poverty-stricken Tuscany of Collodi's tale were removed; Geppetto becomes a comfortably off Tyrolean Austrian wood carver; the impressive tracking shot at the start of Disney's film, panning across the sleeping village, sweeping down through narrow streets to rest on Jiminy Cricket, establishes a background of generalized Germanic or at least northern European character, setting the story in a quaint, generically

folkloristic past. Moreover Disney radically changes Pinocchio's character. In Walt Disney's film it is naïveté and bad company rather than egoism and naughtiness that get Pinocchio into trouble. For example, he doesn't wilfully go to the puppet theatre, as in Collodi, but he is led there by the two villains, the Cat and the Fox. While Collodi's character is aggressive and rebellious until his eventual taming at the end of the tale, Disney's hero is innocent and simple throughout. American critics were expecting a Disneyan Pinocchio; Benigni presented them with a Pinocchio much closer to Collodi's character. The irony is that Collodi's version is much closer to that truly American of characters: the 'Good Bad Boy' like Thomas Bailey in Aldrich's 1869 novel *Story of a Bad Boy* (Aldrich 1990)) and especially Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer (Lurie 2004).

The strangeness of the story – which American critics did not even attempt to understand – derives from the connection the tale has with the Italian situation. In her down-to-earth and well-balanced discussion of this movie's reception in both Italy and the United States, Rebecca West admits that, 'critical hatchet jobs on the film sealed its fate, and it soon disappeared from theatres' (West 2005: 141) and reaches similar conclusions to ours about the movie's failure at the box office. However she attributes the movie's failure not only to external factors, like poor reviews, but also to features of the movie itself, that is, its being an illustration of an icon: 'Collodi's book, while having timeless appeal, is nonetheless a product of Tuscan post-unification Italy. It must be interpreted and not simply illustrated today if it is to be exported successfully for mass audiences' (West 2005: 149). As we have seen the film is not a simple illustration of Collodi's book; it is an original interpretation of an Italian icon in which Benigni emphasizes optimism, zest for life and good intentions. He offers this as a universal model to the international public. He is thus proffering a strongly regional/national element as a contribution to a global culture, one formed through the coexistence of elements from the diverse populations that make up the global community.

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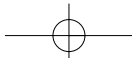
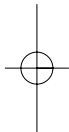
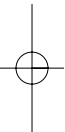
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'Some kind of film-poem': the poetry of Wim Wenders' *Der Himmel Über Berlin/Wings of Desire*

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Abstract

While Wenders adapted a whole series of literary narratives to the screen, *Wings of Desire* features the extraordinary attempt to base a film upon poetic texts (provided by Rainer Maria Rilke and Peter Handke). An analysis of the film's production and of the various aesthetic means employed by the director, as well as a discussion of Wenders' concern for some issues that are related to the poetic discourse, will help to identify an agenda that is firmly rooted in the realm of poetry rather than of narration. Thus previous investigations of *Wings of Desire*, which tend to focus on narrative aspects, are supplemented by a reading that focuses on features not to be addressed by means of narratology, such as the concern for the audible quality of language. Accordingly, *Wings of Desire* will be seen as an attempt to 'speak' the language of poetry onscreen.

Keywords

adaptation of literature
adaptation of poetry
spontaneity
poetic coherence
to describe the
invisible
sound of language

When Wim Wenders began filming *Der Himmel über Berlin/Wings of Desire* (1987), which was to become one of his best-known films ever, he had already adapted quite a number of literary texts for the screen. In 1971 he filmed Peter Handke's *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter/The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* (after having filmed the TV production *Drei amerikanische LPs/Three American LPs* together with Handke in 1969), and one year later he turned Nathaniel Hawthorne's world classic into *Der scharlachrote Buchstabe/The Scarlet Letter* (1972). *Der amerikanische Freund/The American Friend* (1977) is based on Patricia Highsmith's novel *Ripley's Game* (1974), while *Hammett* (1982), Wenders' first Hollywood film, refers to a novel by Joe Gores. Moreover, Wenders collaborated with the American playwright Sam Shepard, who wrote the screenplays for *Paris*, for *Texas* (1984) and for *Don't Come Knocking* (2004), in which Shepard also took the leading part. It is therefore no surprise that in *Wings of Desire* literature was to play a key role again. This time two German writers were particularly influential: Rainer Maria Rilke and Peter Handke. While Handke left his literary imprint, by providing Wenders with 'ten texts [. . .] monologic texts [. . .] but [. . .] no screenplay' (Wenders and Willemsen 2005),¹ Rilke helped to shape the film with his poetry, especially with the *Duino Elegies*: 'The Rilke poems deal a lot with the invisible. Much is told that cannot

1 All translations are by the author except where indicated.

- 2 Barry (1990: 53) points out that 'Handke is himself not inexperienced in film work. He wrote and directed the TV film, *Chronik der laufenden Ereignisse*, in 1971 as well as the feature-length piece, *Die linkshändige Frau* (produced by Wenders) in 1977'.
- 3 This is not to say, though, that narration is irrelevant for the film. See Lewiston (2004: 147–52), and also Berghahn (1997: 331), who argues that *Wings of Desire* marks the point at which Wenders turns away from 'the primacy of the image' to 'the power of the word': 'In his angel films [...] voice-over narration takes over as the main conveyor of meaning'.
- 4 More recently Wenders's relation to Handke has been addressed by Malaguti (2008).
- 5 'Her free flying on the trapeze in her winged costume makes her angel-like at times, yet she is linked to the earth and thus connects angelic and human existences. [...] She is a human with physical desires, but she exhibits strong metaphysical longings' (Caldwell and Rea 1991: 48).
- 6 This holds true even though Caldwell and Rea (1991: 47) have paid some attention to the poetic quality of *Wings of Desire* by describing it as 'a visual poem to Berlin and its unique history'.

be told in novels and in films, in fact. And the courage for *Wings of Desire* stems from this volume [of Rilke poems]' (Wenders and Willemssen 2005).²

At first glance *Wings of Desire* seems to fit perfectly well in the series of filmic adaptations outlined above. However, Wenders' reference to monologic texts and poems that tell what cannot be told in novels point to a rather special relationship between literature and film in this particular case. As much as the approaches to literature in Wenders' works prior to *Wings of Desire* may vary, they are alike in that all of them employ *narratives*, i.e. texts that offer a plot. This, however, is not the case in *Wings of Desire*. Both Handke's 'monologic texts', particularly his 'Song of being a child', which opens the film, and Rilke's elegies are characterized by the fact that they are *poetic* texts, i.e. texts in which narration hardly plays any role at all.³ This observation, of course, raises some important questions with regard to the aesthetics of film: How can poems be employed in a medium that relies quite heavily on narration, at least in mainstream cinema? What happens if poetry is transformed into moving images? Where are the aesthetic points of contact between two forms that are as diverse as poetry and film?

While the literary background of *Wings of Desire* has been discussed by various scholars, none of these questions seem to have found any interest – not surprisingly, because hardly any attention has been paid to the fact that, this time, Wenders employed poetic rather than narrative texts. In lieu thereof cinema studies have focused on the transfer of contents, such as motifs, characters and ideas, which could easily stem from poems and narratives alike. Thus Thomas F. Barry, for instance, highlights striking similarities between passages and concepts in the film and Handke's published journals *Das Gewicht der Welt/The Weight of the World* (1977), *Die Geschichte des Bleistifts/History of the Pencil* (1982) and *Phantasien der Wiederholung/Phantasies of Repetition* (1983), and he even identifies quotations from *The Weight of the World* in Marion's monologues (Barry 1990: 55).⁴ Comparing *Wings of Desire* with the *Duino Elegies*, Alice A. Kuzniar demonstrates that 'Rilke and Wenders share not only interest in the angel as motif but, together with Handke, a preoccupation with the issues of temporality, witnessing, and naming' (Kuzniar 1995: 219). One could add to Kuzniar's excellent comparison that the closeness of children and women to the angelic sphere in *Wings of Desire* also echoes Rilke's poetry: children are the only human beings in the film who see and react to the angels, and Marion is very close to the angelic sphere as well.⁵

As opposed to these more content-related issues (which are, of course, very important), the aesthetic implications of the fact that this film refers to poetry have hardly been appreciated yet.⁶ I would therefore like to draw attention to the poetic agenda of *Wings of Desire* by reading Wenders' film as a remarkable attempt to transform *poetry* onto the screen. In order to do so, I will discuss a whole range of filmic features that are closely related to poetic elements: a particular process of production, the relationship between

individual scenes on the one hand and a narrative plan on the other, the non-narrative devices to establish coherence, the film's take on the invisible and the concern for the audible quality of language. By the same token I will pay attention to Wenders' understanding of poetry and the poetic quality of his film. Thus I wish to highlight the extraordinary status of *Wings of Desire* as a film that explores cinematic possibilities to speak the language of poetry.

'Like working on a poem': scenes without narrative

Wings of Desire consists of four storylines, which partly converge: (1) Having wandered through Berlin for centuries, the angel Damiel complains about his angelic existence, because he would like to enjoy human life with all its uncertainties and limitations; after he has fallen in love with the French trapeze artist Marion, he decides to become a mortal human being and eventually gets together with the woman he loves; (2) Preparing for her last performance in a small French circus in Berlin, Marion is afraid of failing and ultimately dying. After she performs successfully and celebrates a farewell party with her colleagues, Marion visits a Nick Cave concert where she meets Damiel with whom she falls in love immediately; the final scene shows her practising on a rope that is being held by her lover; (3) Peter Falk, who keeps his name in the film, flies to Berlin to act in a movie set in World War II. He chats with various people on the set, draws some of them and hangs out in Berlin, preferably at hot dog stands (*Imbissbuden*). Peter feels the presence of angels, and he talks to them when they are around; when he finally meets Damiel as a human being it turns out that Peter has also been an angel who has decided to turn human; (4) On his search for Berlin's past in general and Potsdamer Platz in particular, old Homer looks at photographs in the library and then wanders through Berlin contemplating the achievements of his narratives as well as the loss of his listeners. While these storylines are, of course, meaningful in themselves and hence justify further analysis, they also serve to lead through a whole variety of scenes that do not contribute to the progress of the narrative at all.⁷ With regard to the film's relationship to literature, it is important to note that none of these narratives are taken from any literary source, as all of the texts Peter Handke contributed to the film are 'monologic texts'. Thus Wenders recalls: 'We had come up with scenes and Peter then said, "this I can do, that I cannot do, you can write that: well, I'll write these things for you, but I am not going to write a screenplay for you"' (Wenders and Willemsen 2005).

The non-narrative quality of *Wings of Desire* reflects the way in which the film was produced. Wenders consciously decided to turn away from the narrative concept of film after he had been extremely successful with it in *Paris, Texas*. He explains:

[. . .] that the movie *Paris, Texas* was a heavy burden on me, because everybody had expectations, 'please do something like that again, you told something

⁷ See, for instance, Majer O'Sickey (1994: 143–59). Wenders himself reflects upon the problems of filmic narration in general on various occasions; see Wenders (1998a: 59–61) and Wenders (1998c: 68–77).

8 See Wenders and Willemsen (2005).

straightforwardly in the end, now you can do that, please do it again now'. And the last thing I wanted to do was to do that, to tell such a straightforward story in a straightforward way. And if I ever really did something that meandered about, it was *Wings of Desire*, which, in fact, has no story line at all, strictly speaking. To tell something in a straightforward way was not possible, because we did not have a screenplay and, after all, not even a story. [. . .] In fact, the film only had scenes.

(Wenders and Willemsen 2005)

The concept of a film prioritizing scenes over narrative becomes also evident in Wenders' description of Handke's texts as 'islands':

I more or less dreamed up the screenplay; we invented a lot, and then we moved towards a kind of island, the next island was one of Peter's monologues again; and if we rowed there and arrived there, we had firm ground underneath our feet for a while, and from there we had to set off to the next island, and we had to get to that again and again. And everything in between I wrote myself. [. . .] We had these wonderful texts by Handke, which Peter wrote at random without any structure that would have imposed any limitations.

(Wenders and Willemsen 2005)

Indeed, the aesthetic principle of focussing on separate scenes ('island') and improvising in between them ('at random') reflects Wenders' working method in this particular case. In preparation for the film he designed a pin-board that was divided into two halves: on the left were cards with scenes in which the angels acted as angels and on the right were cards with scenes in which the angels acted after they had become human. Each night the team chose one card from the left half and filmed the scene the next day. When the budget drew to an end, they realized that they had not filmed a single scene from the right half of the board, and hence used the last week of their filming time to select a few cards from this side.⁸ The result of this method is a series of scenes that feature no narrative coherence at all, apart from the fact that they are all witnessed by Cassiel and Damiel, the two angels, wandering about in Berlin. A list of these scenes prove the lack of narrative coherence quite easily: next to a whole range of other situations, we find a father carrying his baby on his back, a young man contemplating the loss of his girlfriend, three children playing a video game, an elderly woman driving a car with her dog sitting next to her, various people reading in a library, various people pondering in the subway, a prostitute waiting for customers, children in the circus, a man committing suicide and so forth. Any narrative connection between these scenes functions as a bridge to link the various islands: the emphasis lies on the individual island while the path from one island to the other is simply random.

In Wenders' view, the subordination of narratives and the primacy of scenes is the precondition of a poetic film for two reasons: First, the focus

on moments and scenes rather than on the narrative link between them is ultimately motivated by the attempt to present the invisible, which Wenders regards as an exclusive feature of poetry:

Poems are the form in which you can say something, put something into words that cannot be told. And that was exactly what the film wanted to do. It wanted to describe the invisible, it is all about the invisible, and actually it tells what cannot be told in films at all.

(Wenders and Willemsen 2005)

To describe the invisible necessarily means to stay away from narratives as they take place in the visible world: they are motivated, plausible and in one way or another reasonable, to be comprehended by means of rational thinking, and even if they are irrational, linked by association. For instance, one can easily find a psychological explanation for them, which, again, is rooted in our earthly reality. Hand in hand with the attempt to film the invisible comes the second reason for the emphasis on scenes. Wenders regards a specific way of *making* this film as a precondition of the outcome's poetic quality: poetic creation appears as an act of spontaneity that jars with the existence of a narrative written down in a script. Thus Wenders calls it his

'Inspiration' [. . .] to approach the film with a poetic language and, altogether, to make its form close to that of a poem. [. . .] Had the film been planned in advance with a story board and all the paraphernalia, no poem would have come out of it.

(Wenders 1992: 223, 226)

On another occasion Wenders explains:

The film came into being like a poem. Without a screenplay. Quite frequently from one day to the next. It was entirely a gut reaction, i.e. it was by no means an intellectual exercise. [. . .] It really is like working on a poem: You work on a word, you work on a line, on a rhyme, and afterwards you wonder, what does it look like, what does it mean.

(Wenders and Willemsen 2005)

Handke too demanded spontaneity rather than a well-prepared and structured narrative for the film: '[. . .] he was ready to take part, provided it would become a film you could make "off the top of your head" ' (Wenders 1998b: 98).

Poetic coherence: the function of light

Even though *Wings of Desire* presents the spectator with an abundance of scenes that put great emphasis on their poetic quality without featuring an indispensable narrative connection, every single scene seems to be integrated

perfectly well into the film as a whole; as much as they vary from each other, none of them stands out from the film or appears to be isolated. In other words, despite the unconventional narrative, there is strong coherence between all these scenes presenting different people in different places with different problems to worry about. But where does this coherence come from? It certainly cannot be explained in Aristotelian terms, because for Aristotle the unity of the play is based upon unity of the plot:

As then in the other arts of representation a single representation means a representation of a single object, so too the plot being a representation of a piece of action must represent a single piece of action and the whole of it; and the component incidents must be so arranged that if one of them be transposed or removed, the unity of the whole is dislocated and destroyed. For if the presence or absence of a thing makes no visible difference, then it is not an integral part of the whole.

(Aristotle 2010)

Given Wenders' concept of scenes as 'islands' rather than elements in a consequential chain, it is more than obvious that this concept of unity and coherence cannot be applied here: there are four plots rather than a single one, and many of the 'component incidents' can easily be swapped for others or even be deleted completely without showing any effect on the narrative. As a result, Aristotle would not accept them as 'integral part of the whole'.

However, any Aristotelian reading of *Wings of Desire* is rather limited as it ignores alternative options of generating aesthetic coherence in a film. Indeed, *Wings of Desire*, shot primarily in black and white images, derives coherence from a specific *filmic* device – the non-narrative means of light:

Sometimes it was frightening, wondering how one could fit all the different elements in [. . .]. I think that everything worked out due to one man who, in the end, had a bigger impact on the film than one ever gave him credit for: That is Henri Alekan. As all these different levels, the circus, Peter Falk, the angels, the city of Berlin, the library, the concerts, all these completely different things that one could not have imagined being thrown together in a film – as all of them had been seen by Henri Alekan, that unbelievable old master and light magician, all these different qualities could suddenly be united; [. . .] and even if it was Nick Cave [. . .], who had nothing to do with anything else whatsoever: the moment Henry cast his light, Nick Cave could also be imagined in this film.

(Wenders and Willemsen 2005)

Wenders also gives credit to Henri Alekan for having transformed the loving look of the angels into a particular camera perspective, thus, again, uniting a whole range of scenes with a common approach:

The biggest task I had in this film was translating the loving look of the angels into camera work and images. [. . .] It was the main idea of the film:

the angels would be able to see us differently, they would be able to see us in such a loving way that one could not even imagine it. [. . .] And from the first day of shooting it was clear: how could the camera achieve this, to look lovingly? [. . .] I owe a lot to Truffaut and to Henri Alekan again. [. . .] That really enabled us to let the angels look upon humans differently.

(Wenders and Willemsen 2005)⁹

9 See Rogowski (1993: 398–409).

There can be no doubt that Wenders and Alekan succeeded in uniting a whole range of diverse scenes by the way in which they handled camera and light; nor can there be any doubt that these devices form a *visual* rather than narrative approach to creating coherence. But can visual art be poetic?

I would like to suggest that there is an aesthetic analogy between visual coherence of scenes in a film and literary coherence of poems in a cycle. Even though all scenes in *Wings of Desire* form a unity, several could be deleted without affecting the whole of the film, because they are held together in a visual rather than a narrative manner. Something similar can be said of the poems in a cycle, the difference being that they are not united by visual means; nevertheless the connection between them is a non-narrative one. Taking ‘Volkweise/Folksong’ out of Rilke’s early cycle *Larenopfer/Lares’ Sacrifice*, for example, and ‘Blaue Hortensie/Blue Hydrangea’ out of *Neue Gedichte/New Poems*, or even the third sonnet out of *Die Sonette an Orpheus/The Sonnets to Orpheus* would not destroy the entire cycle as such, because all subsequent poems do not follow the previous ones in any logical, not even psychological, manner. And yet all of them form a unity. The organizing principle of this unity is as manifold as there are poetic cycles: it can be a place like Prague in *Lares’ Sacrifice*, a specific approach to objects in *New Poems*, a poetic form and a mythological subject in *The Sonnets to Orpheus* and so forth. But hardly ever will the principle be a narrative one – just as in *Wings of Desire*.

The musical quality of language in poetry and film

While the creation of coherence through light can be seen as a parallel to the various ways of coherence in poetic cycles, the film also shows a feature that it shares with a major poetic discourse: an intense concern for the musical quality of poetic language. To begin with, it is quite striking that Wenders’ encounter with Rilke’s poetry is less motivated by his search for new motifs and characters like the angels than by a strong concern for sophisticated language. Having returned to Germany, Wenders realized

that, after eight years in America, I had become somebody who had to search for German words again and again, and I thought, it must not happen to me that I lose my own language, and I deliberately forced myself: I am now reading what I find most beautiful in the German language, every day; and that was then Rilke, and, in fact, as a therapy to regain my German, again.

(Wenders and Willemsen 2005)

Wenders then shows this concern for language as a highly differentiated and subtle means of expression in his approach to Handke's literary contributions to the film. He pays great attention to the rhetorical concept of various levels of expression (*genera dicendi*) and, as a matter of consequence, justifies the quality of Handke's texts with the concept of appropriateness (*aptum*):

I found the elevated tone of Peter's texts appropriate [!] with regard to the roles [. . .]; the angels had to have a language that was different from ours, and I very much agreed with what Peter gave to me [. . .], and, on the other hand, I tried to get away from this elevated tone in everything else around it [. . .]; everything else around it was much more profane, [. . .] and I found this juxtaposition of various tones pretty good.

(Wenders and Willemsen 2005)

Given his interest in the aesthetic subtleties of language it is not at all surprising that Wenders comes to deal with one particular aspect of language that is very important for poetry as well: the audible and even musical dimension of language. *Wings of Desire* opens with a close shot of Daniel's pen writing down his reflections upon childhood in the form of a poem. While we are following Daniel's writing with our eyes, we can also hear him saying what he is writing; at the very end of the film, we hear Daniel's voice prior to seeing that he is writing in his diary. From a semantic point of view, the duality of writing and speaking, or of seeing and hearing, respectively, is not necessary. And yet Wenders, who makes Daniel's thoughts visible, also makes them heard by using what could be called audible subtitles. Also when the two angels read out the notes of their diaries to each other, or when we listen to the voice of a man reading Rilke's poem to Lulu Albert-Lazard in the library, the importance of sound in the visual genre of film is clearly emphasized, especially because in these cases we do not even see any text. Moreover, Daniel's voice in the opening scene switches from speaking to singing thus emphasizing the closeness between the two. The same impression arises when the voices of the readers in the library are backed up by off-screen choral music. Anticipating an idea that will be discussed shortly, I would like to suggest that both the oscillation between and the combination of speaking and singing demonstrates a difference between language and music in degree but not in kind.

Knowingly or not, with his concern for audible language, Wenders participates in a broad and long-lasting discourse in which Rilke also plays an important role. At the heart of this discourse lies the idea that poetic language not only has semantic functions, but also musical qualities; poems not only have a meaning with which they refer to the world, but they also have rhythm and sound that exist in their own right. This idea dates back to ancient times. When Dionysius of Halicarnassus, for instance, analyses 'the sources of charm and beauty in [literary] composition' (Dionysius 1910: 121), two of the four sources he identifies, melody and rhythm, are musical ones, and the other two sources, variety and appropriateness, are exemplified with regard to music:

I may refer, in confirmation, to the case of instrumental music, whether it accompanies singing or dancing; if it attains grace perfectly and throughout, but fails to introduce variety in due season or deviates from what is appropriate, the effect is dull satiety and that disagreeable impression which is made by anything out of harmony with the subject.

(Dionysius 1910: 125)

Dionysius offers a detailed analysis of musical aspects in spoken language and defines rules that 'should be observed in composition by a writer who looks to please the ear':

Either he should link to one another melodious, rhythmical, euphonic words, by which the sense of hearing is touched with a feeling of sweetness and softness [. . .] or he should intertwine and interweave those which have no such natural effect with those that can so bewitch the ear that the unattractiveness of the one set is overshadowed by the grace of the other.

(Dionysius 1910: 135)¹⁰

Dionysius' entire approach is based upon the notion that

The science of public oratory is, after all, a sort of musical science, differing from vocal and instrumental music in degree, not in kind. In oratory, too, the words involve melody, rhythm, variety, and appropriateness; so that, in this case also, the ear delights in the melodies, is fascinated by the rhythms, welcomes the variations, and craves always what is in keeping with the occasion. The distinction between oratory and music is simply one of degree.

(Dionysius 1910: 125)

From Early Modern times on, the primacy of music to be found in Dionysius' take on language featured as an important notion in prominent theories of German poetry, until it finally became a key idea in Rilke's aesthetic environment.¹¹ In *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik/The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, which Rilke knew very well, Nietzsche derives not only tragedy but also poetry from music: 'He [the lyricist] has, as a Dionysian artist, first of all become wholly at one with the archetypal One, its pain and contradiction, and thus produces the reflection of this One as music' (Nietzsche 1954a: 37).¹² While Nietzsche took up and intensified the importance of music in the field of literature, the prime device of this field, language, found itself in a deep crisis. It was Nietzsche again who set the philosophical scene for the language crisis in his treatise *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinn/On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* (1873, first published in 1896) to be supported by Fritz Mauthner's *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache/Contributions to a Critique of Language* a few years later (started in 1891, published in 1901–02). Both Nietzsche and Mauthner argue that not only has language lost its connection to reality, but it has also developed into a barrier between humans

10 Dionysius also tells the writer what he ought not to do: 'Many words of few syllables must not be used in succession (for this jars upon the ear), nor an excessive number of polysyllabic words; and we must avoid the monotony of setting side by side words similarly accented or agreeing in their quantities' (Dionysius 1910: 133).

11 See Harsdoerffer (1969: 18); Birken (1973: 3); Gottsched (1962: 377). Gottsched dedicates a whole chapter of his *Critische Dichtkunst* to 'euphony of poetic style', which he defines as 'everything about the verse that matters to the ear' (1962: 377).

12 Translation by the editor.

13 Translation by the editor.

14 Translation by Charlie Louth (Oxford).

and the world: 'Truths are illusions that we have forgotten are illusions, metaphors which have been used up and have lost their sensual power', Nietzsche explains (1954b: 314)¹³ and Mauthner argues:

What thinks in us is the language; what produces literature in us is the language. The feeling that has so often been put into words: "It is not me who is thinking; it thinks in me –" the feeling that there is no escape from this is simply the way it is.

(Mauthner 1921: 42)

Nietzsche's and Mauthner's linguistic scepticism had a deep impact on the musical discourse within poetry as it weakened the semantic dimension of language. As a consequence, authors of the *fin de siècle* did not only look for alternative means of aesthetic expression, such as gesture and dance, but they also highlighted and explored the non-semantic aspects of language itself, i.e. its musical dimension.

In conjunction with the crisis of language as the prime device to convey meaning towards the end of the nineteenth century, the high esteem for music in the field of literature left a clear imprint on German modernist poetry. While Hugo von Hofmannsthal turns away from poetry altogether, for reasons given in the famous 'The Letter of Lord Chandos', and focuses on providing music with words in his libretti, Stefan George claims: 'The value of poetry is not determined by meaning (otherwise it would be wisdom) but by form i.e. nothing superficial, but instead this deeply exciting quality of metre (*maass*) and timbre (*klang*)' (George 1998: 68). Similarly Rilke, despite having a rather difficult relationship with music, emphasizes the value of musical qualities in his early theoretical writings, in his journals and correspondence (especially with Magda von Hattingberg). In one of his best-known poems, music is even preferred to language. In the opening stanza the speaker expresses his scepticism about words:

I am so afraid of people's words.
They say everything so clearly:
And this is called dog, and that is called house,
and here is the beginning and the end is there.

Having given several examples of how language destroys reality ('I feel, you slay all the things'), the speaker introduces music as an alternative: 'I always want to warn and fend: stay away. / The things singing I so love to hear' (Rilke 1996: 106).¹⁴

The way in which Wenders treats the sound of language in *Wings of Desire* is strikingly similar to the discourse outlined so far, thus achieving yet another poetic quality of the film. In addition to the opening shot several scenes feature concern for the *sound* of language. Throughout the film the spectator is presented with different languages: most of the

characters, including the angels, speak German (' "Jetzt" und "Jetzt" sagen können und nicht wie immer "seit je" und "in Ewigkeit" '), Peter Falk speaks English ('I can't see you, but I know you're here! I feel it. I wish I could see your face'), Marion and her colleagues speak French ('Que dois-je faire? Plus rien penser'), a woman sitting in a laundromat and a family in a car passing by speak Turkish ('Arabada sakın boynunuzdu düsareye cikarmayin dogru oturun') and a man in the library reads Hebrew ('Bereschit bara elohim et ha'aretz. Weha'aretz hajeta tohuwawohu'). The fact that most of what is presented in foreign languages is subtitled already points to the importance of the sound of language, all the more as a German audience is accustomed to finding foreign languages dubbed rather than subtitled on screen. Not so in *Wings of Desire*. Wenders obviously wants the sounds of various languages to be heard, and, what is even more striking, he repeatedly prioritizes sound over meaning: the reading of French and English texts in the library, some of Marion's soliloquies and Turkish as well as Hebrew in the film are *not* subtitled. All that the audience can rely on in these cases is the sound of these languages, and it does, indeed, create a certain atmosphere. The same can be said of the scene in which Damiel comes across, and then leaves, a motorcyclist dying on the road after an accident. While Damiel is walking away from the scene of the accident you can hear the victim's voice off-screen. All it articulates, however, is this:

The flecks of the first drops of rain. The sun.
 The bread and the wine.
 The skipping step.
 The easter feast.
 The veins of the leaves.
 The waving grass.
 The colours of the stones
 The pebbles on the bottom of the streambed. The white tablecloth outdoors.
 The dream of a house [. . .] (Wenders and Handke 1987: 54)

Due to the lack of any predicate, none of the subjects and attributes that are to be heard forms any statement. Consequently, anybody who knows German can understand the words, but they do not reveal any plausible meaning. All that is left is their *sound* to accompany the images of Berlin.

The importance of the sound of language in *Wings of Desire* is no coincidence; it stems from Wenders' musical approach to language. Thus he explains:

Although there is an awful lot of text in the film, you can actually regard all text as music. In a way, all the voices the angels hear are music. [. . .] And in the end, the entire film is actually a silent movie: in the end, you do not have to follow the meaning [of the voices]. You can just as well simply hear the entire film as music, and it still works nevertheless.

(Wenders and Willemsen 2005)

This is exactly what happens in all the scenes discussed so far. Even though most of the audience do not understand what the Turkish father in the car says to his family or what the Turkish woman in the laundromat is contemplating, or what the Hebrew lines that are read out mean, and even though the German words of the dying biker do not feature any plausible meaning, in all these cases the sound of language comments on the images in precisely the same way that music is used in a film: it creates atmosphere, it gives various characters their own individual voice and it establishes a certain intimacy by letting the spectator witness the hidden thoughts and emotions of the characters in an immediate, audible way. It is, of course, hard to tell whether Wenders was aware of the poetic discourse outlined above. All that can be said for sure is that the Reclam edition of Rilke's poetry he used does contain several poems (albeit no theoretical writings, of course) that treat music as a subject. However, even if Wenders had no knowledge of this discourse at all, he did contribute to it with his attempt to make a poetic film.

Conclusion: a poetic film about Berlin

While the adaptation of literature onto the screen can be described as the filming of either a novel or a play, there is no expression that would fit Wenders' attempt to treat poetry in *Wings of Desire*. 'Filming of a poem' would certainly not be adequate, as there is no particular poem or poetic cycle that would have been adapted to the screen, nor can *Wings of Desire* be read as a filmic attempt to adapt Rilke's poetry in general, because this subject is far too diverse both in content and in form to be treated in a single artwork. Moreover the phrase 'filming of a poem' is not appropriate because, despite the lack of a screenplay, the film does feature narratives that are not to be tackled by the means of poetic analysis. Describing the film as an adaptation of poetry would therefore mean to neglect or even deny an important dimension, which would be all the more unsustainable as Homer's storyline circles around nothing else but narrating. Wenders himself called his film 'a kind of film poem' (2005: 1–2, booklet) thus implying that it features poetic qualities without necessarily being a poem. Following this view I identified features that, for good reason, can be called poetic: the emphasis on spontaneity in the making of the film, and on scenes in its outcome; the attempt to film the invisible; the coherence achieved by light and camera treatment rather than a narrative; the concern for audible words; and the musical use of language. My emphasis on the poetic qualities of the film was meant to highlight an aspect that tends to be overlooked in the widespread reading of film as a play on screen. It is *poetry* that lies at the heart of *Wings of Desire* – or as Wenders puts it,

In producing this film, I wanted to re-discover my home country, but above all my language. It was the poems by Rainer Maria Rilke and the city of Berlin that inspired and encouraged me to create the figures of the angels [. . .].

(Wenders 2005: booklet, 2)

Wings of Desire is the outcome of this inspiration: it is a *poetic* film about Berlin.

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Circling the city in Fernando Lopes' *Belarmino* (1964)

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Abstract

Taking Belarmino as a portrait of the atmosphere of Lisbon in the early 1960s rather than the cinebiography of the relatively minor sportsman Belarmino Fragoso, this article analyses how the protagonist's circulation by foot in the city is used to convey this 'soggy grey ambiance'. Drawing on Bruno's ideas concerning film and flânerie, it is argued that by observing the protagonist's impoverished interaction with everyday urban space, with which struggle an explicit parallel with his career as a boxer is drawn, the viewer emotionally experiences the isolation and alienation of the protagonist. Supposed to stand as a metaphor for Lisbon and Portugal, this emotional access to the protagonist's plight permits Belarmino to stand, as the director wished, as a portrait of the city in a certain epoch of its history: 'you look at Lisbon in the film and you see what Lisbon was like back then' (Lopes).

Keywords

Belarmino
Fernando Lopes
Lisbon
1960s
flânerie

Generally considered to be the second film of the *Novo Cinema Português*, Lopes' documentary charts the life and times of an ex-boxer in the Lisbon of the early 1960s. In his dictionary of Portuguese film, Portuguese critic Leitão Ramos states:

Tracing out the profile of the fighter Belarmino Fragoso, via an interview conducted by the journalist Baptista-Bastos, this film speaks to us about the city of Lisbon and the hurried breathing of a hunted country. Sinewy images, hard words, to hell with the truth and the lies of this forsaken man. The soggy grey ambiance of Lisbon in the 1960s can be found here, dressed up in a tie and broken down, shipped out, fated to emigrate only to 'take a hiding'. Barred windows and jazz, in splintered screams. No dreams, no illusions, just weariness. A montage that wants to take flight and a reality that pins it back. Neither compassionate nor exultant, *Belarmino* is simply a blow to the stomach.

(Leitão Ramos 1989: 52, translation mine)

This synthesis of the film's concerns will provide the starting point for my own argument. Rather than a cinebiography of a minor sportsman, the true focus of Lopes' film is on the conditions of life in the 1960s' Portugal, with a particular emphasis on the urban tissue of Lisbon and the space of the everyday.

Belarmino comprises two strands: an experiential strand and an interview strand, and continually alternates between each one. The experiential strand registers Fragoso's current and former activities. Over the opening sequence, interviewer Baptista-Bastos informs us that 'Belarmino Fragoso could have been a great boxer, one of the finest in Europe, perhaps even welterweight champion, but now he's little more than a punch bag'. With this, the only piece of voice-over, in *Belarmino*, Lopes' film implicitly presents itself as a factual investigation into the career of the ex-boxer. We are led to expect a line of inquiry in the interview, accompanied by relevant direct images in the experiential strand, that will address questions such as: How could he have been great? Why did he fail? And so on.

Whilst these issues are addressed to an extent, much of *Belarmino* seems superfluous to these concerns, not least the very activities recorded in the experiential thread. Many of the extended sequences show us aspects of the ex-boxer's non-professional life, both past and present that appear to be only tenuously linked to the outcome of his career. The implication is that the importance of Fragoso's life overflows the boxing ring. Examining the vague chronology Fragoso gives for the events he mentions, we realize that many of the boxing-related activities that Lopes films are being replayed for the camera, Fragoso having effectively retired some years previous to the production of the film. What, then, is the purpose of the experiential strand? To document the spaces and activities of Fragoso's life, even if to do so entails re-staging, it is true; but also, and more importantly, to create a pattern of metaphors for Portuguese society at the height of the depredations of the Salazar dictatorship, images that convey the 'hurried breathing of a hunted country' Leitão de Barros describes.

Fragoso is, in *Belarmino*, a sort of everyman figure. In reaction to Lopes' depiction of the ex-boxer, the contemporary surrealist poet Alexandre O'Neill wrote a poem entitled 'Belarmino', which contains the lines: 'You had what it took, like any one of us/And you were the champ, like any one of us' (O'Neill 2005: 215). The identification with Fragoso proclaimed by O'Neill's poetic voice is echoed by Baptista-Bastos. Defending the importance of *Belarmino*, he states: 'it was a time necessitating testimony, and we presumed that, if we exposed the predicament of one man with sufficient clarity, we would all be represented' (in Costa e Silva 1991: 57). For Lopes himself, Fragoso

could be a metaphor for myself and for what the country was like at that time. Both in the filming and in the montage, I take Fragoso's side, stand next to him, identify myself with him. It is as if he were my alter ego.

(Costa e Silva 1991: 74)

Fragoso is therefore part of a chain of metaphors, the ex-boxer representing the condition of the generation involved in the production of the film, the city of Lisbon in which they lived and the country in which they found themselves. I argue that, though there is an obviously critical attitude

towards Fragoso, the viewer is also invited to identify emotionally with the plight of the ex-boxer by accompanying him as he circulates in the 'soggy grey ambience of Lisbon in the 1960s'.

The experiential strand of *Belarmino* displays the characteristics of what Nichols calls 'observational cinema'. By showing people in their natural environment without excessive or overbearing interference on the part of the film-makers, 'observational cinema affords the viewer an opportunity to look in on and overhear something of the lived experience of others' (Nichols 1991: 40). *Belarmino's* experiential strand allows us to experience the distinct rhythms of his everyday life and to see the tones, shapes and spatial relationships between the boxer and the city in the empirical historical world.

The interview strand of the film serves not just to elicit information about Fragoso and his life but also to set the prevailing atmosphere of *Belarmino*. For Bragança, 'Lopes had a truly creative intuition when, to obtain a faithful representation of a Belarmino squeezed by life, he decides to "squeeze" him in the interview' (in Costa e Silva 1991: 177). The claustrophobia, tension and unrelenting nature of Baptista-Bastos' questioning, what he calls the 'fearful substance' of their colloquy, can be seen as both a way to elicit information from the respondent and metaphoric of a wider situation within the life of the country. This is especially important when, due to the censorship that existed in Salazar's Portugal, there were tight limits to what the film could show concerning the pressures and tribulations of the boxer's life in the city.

The portrait of Fragoso and of life in Lisbon depicted in *Belarmino* is patent right through from the film's typically 1960s opening credits. We see a succession of still shots of the ex-boxer out on the streets of Lisbon, suggesting a focus on the reality of life on the streets. These stills are taken with an extremely shallow depth of field, which, in picking out the figure of Fragoso, suggests both the ex-boxer's isolated situation and his representativeness. In making *Belarmino*, an engagement with the conditions of the city was an explicit aim for Fernando Lopes. He has stated in interview that

it was always present in my mind [. . .] that this film had a temporal location. The city too, and that I should bear witness to this time. That's why, thirty-something years after *Belarmino* was made, you look at Lisbon in the film and you see what Lisbon was like back then.

(Costa e Silva 1991: 74)

In the transition from the credits to the first scene in the gym, initially seen through a wire fence, an equation is established between a lonely life in the streets of Lisbon and the scenes of combat by boxing that permeate the whole of Lopes' film, as well as the interacting motifs of struggle and entrapment.

The opening sequence starts with a long shot of Fragoso and a gym full of other boxers in training. Both the visual and the soundtracks are

carefully edited: from the sweat, aggression and swift movements of the fighters, a graceful, rhythmic sequence is fashioned; and from the huff and puffs of exertion, the smack of gloves against punch bags and the whistle and slap of skipping ropes, an almost musical accompaniment is orchestrated. The net effect is to create a feeling of Fragoso being alone and entirely focussed on his own struggle, whilst the rest of the room's occupants concentrate exclusively on theirs. A correlative for the anomie of the city is established by a revisitation of the trope of being alone in the hostile crowd. This feeling is compounded by the claustrophobic nature of the soundtrack, in which the treble of the ambient noise is heightened and separated by the echoes in this enclosed space.

One of the principal ways in which Fragoso's predicament is represented, creating in the process metaphors for the state of the nation, is in his interactions with urban space as he moves round the city. The notion of *flânerie* has come to some prominence in recent theorization of film. For British documentarist Patrick Keiller the *flâneur* now carries a camera (Keiller 2003: 75). *Flânerie* is a mode of attention that focuses on two targets, to wit: 'people and everyday lives' and 'states of mind through places' (Keiller 2003: 75). These are the foci of *Belarmino's* experiential strand: the quotidian of a certain marginalized individual drawn from the capital's lower classes and the emotional and psychological effects of his marginalization.

It is perhaps Giuliana Bruno who has best theorized the relationship between *flânerie*, film and the city. Her ideas on the production of emotion through the traversal of the city and the relation of this to film may usefully inform a reading of how *flânerie* functions in *Belarmino's* experiential strand. For Bruno, in the traversal of site by sight, 'motion produces emotion and emotion contains a movement' (Bruno 2000: 6). The motion in *Belarmino* is the traversal of the city and the ex-boxer's existence within it, the emotion produced is one of pity for and indignation at his and the city's condition, and the movement is one of identification with the man in his everyday habitat.

Films can be linked to other practices that correlate the dialectic process of moving and feeling, such as tourism ('site-seeing') and architecture. Bruno writes: 'when we speak of site-seeing we imply that, because of a film's spatio-corporal mobilization, the spectator is rather a "voyager": a passenger who traverses a haptic, emotive terrain' (Bruno 2000: 6). In *Belarmino*, we visit Lisbon in the early 1960s, moving through its spaces in the company of the ex-boxer and in the process we sample his loneliness and alienation. *Belarmino* was shot on location, with the city as its specific topography. Seeing Fragoso's life within those spaces, according to Bruno's ideas, would allow the viewer to feel, to a degree, the lived experience displayed: 'such is the pleasure of the haptic wanderings experienced by the spectator: one imagines oneself residing in a place, in someone else's space, and tangibly maps oneself within it' (Bruno 2000: 36).

Bruno makes one comment that is particularly apposite to *Belarmino*: 'to open the fabric of the city to view involves a liminal movement between

exterior and interior' (Bruno 2000: 35). Before examining the relevance of this statement to Lopes' film, it is important to establish a definition for the metaphor 'the fabric of the city'. Urban fabric, for my purposes, is, as Rob Shields argues, 'more a way of life than a morphology' (Shields 1999: 72). That is to say, rather than referring to the impersonal way in which urban space is linked together via town planning, for example, here it means more the way in which disparate parts of the city are stitched together through the practices of its inhabitants and, in *Belarmino*'s case, through the exemplary trajectory of one man. This movement between inside and outside is one of the most prominent characteristics of Lopes' documentary, exemplified by the transition from the credits to the film proper, and contributes, I argue, to the way in which the situation of both the city and the man are conjoined in *Belarmino*.

This imbricating process manifests itself on several levels. The most simple of these is when, in the space of a single sequence, we move from the interior of buildings to the exterior of public or shared spaces and vice versa as we accompany Fragoso on his movements through Lisbon. There is a sequence when the camera pans over the façades of the buildings on the Rua Barros Queirós, where Fragoso and his family live. There is then a cut to the interior of their family home. This movement from the outside in is mirrored when Fragoso is shown leaving the building to set forth on another day spent trying to make ends meet. We see a very intricate sequence in which there is a pan to accompany the ex-boxer as he descends the stairs from the intimacy and protection of his own household and emerges into the harsh light of the street. The film then cuts to Fragoso making his way along the Rua Barros Queirós. Similar movements from the interior to exterior occur when Fragoso emerges from subterranean tunnels and corridors into the gym and the stadium, respectively, and also in the shot-counter shot sequence in which Fragoso walks out onto his balcony and seems to square up for a combat with the city where the gross mismatch in height, weight and reach between the two opponents is painfully palpable. Despite the ex-boxer's factual obfuscations and the ambiguous morality patent in the interview strand, when we see the unequal struggle between the ex-boxer and the prevailing conditions in the city we cannot help but feel sympathy for Fragoso.

One important facet of Bruno's argument is that the experience of space provided by cinematic *flânerie* is haptic rather than merely visual, insofar as film is able to 'map a spatio-temporal flow and thus to fully re-embody a "sense" of space. In the evolution of perspectival practice, an aspect of tactile experience – space that is lived – became charted in descriptive film practices' (Bruno 2000: 181). Following this argument, in *Belarmino*, as well as being given a sight of the ex-boxer's life, we are given an insight into what it feels like to be living it, an experience that Lopes' film suggests has common resonances for the general conditions of existence in Lisbon at that time. The hapticity of Lopes' film is demonstrated by the way in which *Belarmino*'s dislocation in the city is linked to his

moving from place to place, from the stadium to the *Baixa*, from the ring to Restauradores square.

Film for Bruno is haptic because it creates a space that is habitable, habitability implying an environment within which the spectator or his proxy comes into contact with the city, not merely viewing a representation of it with our eyes, but experiencing the sensation of seeing urban space at first hand. This sensation can be exemplified by reference to the sequence in which Belarmino wanders aimlessly through the downtown area of Lisbon. Long shots of the ex-boxer alternate with closer shots that reveal the things that he is seeing, such as the tilt up at a movie poster, or the medium shot of the doorman of the cinema. In a more general sense, the experiential strand can be said to reveal to the viewer the lifeworld that Fragoso experiences day in and day out.

One of the salient features of the interview strand is the way in which it reveals the ex-boxer's self-mythologizing as a compensatory mechanism for the strictures of his current life. This sequence showing Fragoso's meandering around the city centre also serves to make his bluster more tangible. After Belarmino walks past the cinema we hear on the soundtrack the atmospheric noise of the screening in a cinema auditorium, complete with the muffled noise of what would seem to be a western. The effect is to portray Fragoso as the protagonist and spectator of his own interior epic, and to give a sonic indication of the insulating self-mythology he reiterates throughout the interview strand.

Here it is useful to discuss briefly the value of reconstruction and restaging in the documentary, since the importance of the experiential strand and the haptic experience that I argue it provides hangs to a degree upon this. Reconstructions differ from fictionalizations in that they aim to recreate an event as faithfully as possible. For Corner, they have a 'proxemic effect' (Corner 1996: 35), that is to say, they have the capacity to bring us closer to the local human detail within the larger themes and sphere of action addressed. Corner goes on to claim that through reconstructions 'viewers are invited not to an exposition but to the witnessing of the "intimation" of an action' (Corner 1996: 35). Bruno argues that as film moves us through space, the unfolding of the cinematic narrative brings us into contact with that space. In *Belarmino*, it is through reconstruction, with its inherent approximative effect, that the viewer is brought into emotional contact with the flipside of Lisbon in the early 1960s.

Bruno explains the capacity that cinematic works have to move us, maintaining that possessing the 'prosthetic ability to extend the range of our corporeal way of seeing, film has the power to engage the affective life of human subjects and to envision the emotional impact of the environment and objects that surround them' (Bruno 2000: 256). In the sequence in which we see Fragoso walking towards the Rossio, we see both his self-positioning as a man about town and the ultimate isolation of his life in the city. First the ex-boxer is shown in a long shot wandering down the street. The camera is positioned at street level and a jaunty music

accompanies Fragoso as he saunters along. As he turns into a cross street there is a cut to a high-angle shot and the music changes into an almost funereal dirge. Due to the distance, Fragoso appears to be moving much more slowly through the throng. The difference between the emotional effects of the two types of music suggests that when we look at Fragoso from a more objective angle, rather than from the level of the ex-boxer's own perspective on things, his life is then displayed with 'no dreams, no illusions, just weariness'.

The relation between emotion, affect and corporeal ways of seeing and the role of sound in *Belarmino* is an important one. Lopes' film makes extensive use of the real sounds of the city, attempting to render the sonic substance of Lisbon life by admitting what Chion (1994) termed 'the drone of the world'. For Chion, film represents this sonic environment through the use of what he calls 'elements of auditory setting'. These are 'sounds with a more or less punctual source, which appear more or less intermittently and which help to create and define a film's space by means of specific, distinct small touches' (Chion 1994: 54).

In *Belarmino*, these small auditory details include the sounds of trams, cars, calls from street vendors and the general hubbub of people going places. Historical sounds such as these provide a reminder that what we see in shot is part of a larger continuum, and thus they further the film's claim to be representative of a wider historical reality. Their prominence and self-conscious manipulation also enables the viewer's experience of the film to exceed its visual level. In the way that such sounds help create the sensation of an environment with depth, *Belarmino*'s elements of auditory setting permit the viewers of Lopes' film simultaneously to see Lisbon and to hear it around them, and thus to engage with the city haptically, as well as reacting emotionally and thus enabling the images to achieve a metaphorical value as more than the simple portrayal of an action.

Chion asserts that an element of auditory setting 'inhabits and defines a space, unlike a "permanent" sound such as the continuous chirping of birds or the noise of the ocean surf that is the space itself' (Chion 1994: 54). At diverse points we hear different sounds of the city. This explains the sensation of *flânerie* engendered by *Belarmino*: the alternation of sounds connotes passage, as if the viewer hears the noises while walking past them at street level. At key junctures in the ambulatory stream of images, sound and source are separated and take on the function of expanding the emotional repercussions of the image track. As we move through Fragoso's life, the emotions prompted by what we see of episodes from his everyday as they happen in specific places are contextualized and deepened by what we hear.

We see this interrelationship in effect in the morning sequence in which Fragoso and his wife prepare for their working day. First there is a long shot of the façades of the buildings along Fragoso's street. A tram passes below, the distinctive rattle of its carriage and the squeal of its belaboured wheels can be distinctly heard off-shot as its antennae sweep

past in the foreground. Next we see Fragoso in long shot, dominating the scene as he walks out and stands on his veranda. We then see, in a point of view shot, the object of the ex-boxer's contemplative gaze: the emblematic Castle of Saint George, perched high above Lisbon. Typical urban sounds suffuse both shots. It is the conjunction of sound and images that creates the impression of a mismatch between the ex-boxer and the situation he has to confront, as I discussed earlier. The sounds, which continue in the point of view shot just as they were in close up, have the effect of hemming in the ex-boxer and suggesting, in a manner similar to the interview thread, a Fragoso 'squeezed by life'.

Since *Belarmino* contains none of the mobile, street-level *vérité*-style camerawork normally, and superficially associated with *flânerie*, it is necessary here to examine the ways in which we can see this mode of urban experience functioning in the film. Firstly, it must be said that it is not necessary for the camerawork to replicate exactly the motion and point of view of the lone pedestrian. The films of Patrick Keiller, one of the most important exponents of the *flâneur* mode in contemporary documentary, are an extreme example of this: in *London* (1994) and *Robinson in Space* (1997) no camera movement at all is used. Though he makes no use of these techniques in his own films, preferring to propel the images via a voice-over narrative, Keiller's ideas on the different modes of camera movement available to render townscapes on film can help us examine closer *Belarmino*'s relation to Lisbon.

There are two scenes in which we are given the ex-boxer's experience of the city from his point of view, which I have already discussed insofar as they knit the interior and the exterior of the city together. These sequences are characterized by the use of three main camera techniques: tilts, pans and point of view tracking shots. For Keiller, who groups these shots together under the label 'moving linear camera at eye level' (Keiller 2003: 80), these camera techniques introduce elements of subjectivity into the filming of townscapes. Keiller claims that this sort of camera movement records the experience of space rather than the space itself, this being the province of 'objective' shots. I would add here that *flânerie* depends on the sort of unhurriedness associated with the historical figure of the *flâneur* and is a defining characteristic of both Keiller and Lopes' filming techniques.

In the first sequence, we see a long angled shot of the ex-boxer walking through Lisbon. Then the camera pans over the façades of buildings from a low-angle point of view, implicitly that of the ex-boxer at street level. Thus captured, these buildings give an impression of monumentality owing to their converging verticals and of alienation through their material obliviousness and impersonality. We then return to a long high-angle shot of Fragoso looking up at the buildings. This almost seems to be from the point of view of the buildings that comprise the space in which the ex-boxer finds himself entrapped.

The second key sequence denoting *flânerie* starts with the camera tilting down to show Fragoso running towards the exit of a darkened

tunnel. It then cuts to the ex-boxer emerging onto the stadium track. From a great distance the camera slowly pans round to accompany him as he runs the circuit. Again there is the sensation that Fragoso is lost in space, as he is hardly more than a stick figure picked out against the massive stands of a stadium that had the capacity to seat 90,000 spectators. He toils away alone, then, in a space designed to accommodate a good percentage of the city's population, as he runs the long, arduous circuit in the midst of an empty stadium – a biting metaphor for the decline of his career and also for the anomie of the city.

There follows another cut to the far side of the track. As the ex-boxer begins to approach the camera it tilts up towards the floodlights. Next there is a cut to the sky over Lisbon's city centre. The two scenes are joined by a graphic alignment between the floodlights and the streetlamps. The camera tracks along a Neo-Classical façade. Then there is a cut to a high-angle shot of the ex-boxer, now dressed in his normal clothes rather than his training gear. Continuity is thus established between Fragoso's loneliness in the stadium and his experience of the city.

Throughout *Belarmino* there is an equation of Fragoso's life in the city, his career in the ring and the general conditions in 1960s Portugal. This process is synthesized in the emotional response provoked by the penultimate sequence showing a footage from Fragoso's fight with Toni Alonso crosscut with shots of the ex-boxer drinking from a fountain on a cold Lisbon morning. Fragoso's sharp intake of breath at the coldness of the water is the same sound that we hear during the boxing bout and, when we see extracts from the match, the sounds of the city can still be heard. The sounds of the city and the sight of boxing overlap, and thus a parallel between ring and city is drawn on both the image and the sound tracks. What we are given, rather than any hard facts about Fragoso's attributes as a boxer or his difficulties as a citizen, is an assertion of the psychological and emotional impact of his lone struggle for survival in an inhospitable environment.

In the light of this sound bridge we can read the earlier shots of the façades as an equation of the city within which Fragoso struggles in his day-to-day life to the ropes around the arena in which he fights. Circling the city turns urban space, symbolically, into a sort of boxing ring. The concept that boxing is being used as a metaphor for life at this time is clearly suggested earlier in the interview strand. Before becoming a boxer, Fragoso had been a shoeshine boy. Explaining how he came to conceive of boxing as a career, Fragoso describes an early incident in which, during a training fight, he received a vicious blow to the stomach. The experience left him frightened of boxing and unwilling to get back in the ring. Soon after, Fragoso explains: 'I began to think that my life, that boxing and shoe-shining were the same thing, and that I had to make some money to eat because I had none'. The violence of the ring is explicitly compared to the violence of poverty and exploitation.

The fight between Fragoso and Alonso, the ex-boxer's first for several years, is shown in a very carefully edited montage sequence, cut to accompany

the rhythm of the action. It is punctuated by freeze frames showing Fragoso being attacked, defending himself and struggling to counter-attack. There are seven of these stills, which the director has explained as signifying Fragoso's 'passion', the seven stations of the ex-boxer's own trip to Calvary (in Costa e Silva 1991: 191). This comparison to Christ is perhaps a little overwrought, but the idea of Fragoso's suffering standing in for a wider body of people remains. We never see the result of the fight with Toni Alonso. Indeed, the outcome is immaterial if we take it as one more symbol signifying the arduous struggle of Fragoso and others like him to stay on their feet in the city.

In the interview scene preceding the fight, Fragoso reveals that he is thinking of emigrating to pursue his career abroad, a risible suggestion in view of his current state, but an echo of the many people leaving Portugal in the 1960s. Discussing the end of his career, Fragoso agrees with Baptista-Bastos' ironic assertion: 'therefore you are a champion that is going to go out a champion'. His self-mythification seemingly ratified, Fragoso talks of his possible future as a trainer and a maker of champions. With no contacts, no capital, no education and, it would seem, no opportunities, this is a wishful thinking of the highest order. The discussion of this unlikely possibility is heard over a long high-angle shot of the boxer standing alone in the street, taken through the blurred wrought-iron bars of a balcony. There is a slow rack focus that reverses the blurriness of the balustrade and the clarity of the street, leaving Fragoso indistinct in the midst of the mass of passers-by and bringing the bars into focus. *Belarmino* ends with a final use of urban space to show Fragoso's entrapment within his situation, the effect of the balustrade closing in around him imprisoning the ex-boxer both in his life and in his city.

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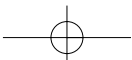
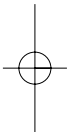
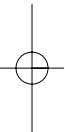
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Shane Meadows and the British New Wave: Britain's hidden art cinema

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Abstract

This article seeks to highlight the textual parallels of the British New Wave and the films of Shane Meadows, supported by the Bordwellian definition of art cinema. In so doing, I will encourage a reassessment of British social realism within the wider framework of art cinema, demonstrating how a focus on the aesthetic, formal and stylistic characteristics of the mode offers us new points of departure in our analysis of British realism. To this end, Andrew Higson's and John Hill's sociologically inclined readings of the New Wave cycle are evoked to reflect the dominant critical discourses that have inhibited broader engagements with the films. Hill's and Higson's class-based interpretations of the New Wave's problematic aesthetic issues are reapplied to the recent films of Shane Meadows, highlighting the manner in which similar aesthetic compositions occur across British social realist films, from the middle-class gaze of the New Wave to the apparently authentic approach of Meadows. By illuminating the narrow boundaries of these socio-political reading strategies, I advance a case for an understanding of British realism based on authorship and the pursuit of self-consciously disseminated lyricism.

Keywords

British social realism
the British New Wave
Shane Meadows
art cinema
Bordwell
Poetic realism

On the surface, British cinema and art cinema appear incompatible; one finds it far easier to look to the post-war cultural spheres of France, Italy and Germany for critically sanctioned examples of concertedly oppositional and innovative film-making. Perhaps the flourishing of modernism in the films of Derek Jarman and Peter Greenaway in the 1980s would be the closest most would come to identifying a unique and indigenous art cinema within the country. I intend to suggest an alternative. The function of this article is two-fold. Firstly, I would like to argue that Britain has and does still have an art cinema that bears comparison to those of its more illustrious continental neighbours in the form of social realism, a form for which art cinema potentials were first realized in the short-lived British New Wave from 1959 to 1963. This textual and political approach has continued to diversify and flourish through a range of practitioners such as Ken Loach, Mike Leigh, Stephen Frears and Hanif Kureishi, Alan Clarke and most recently Shane Meadows. Secondly, I want to identify the manner in which some of the most substantial and influential critical work on the British New Wave has contributed to an effective retardation of the examination of social realism as a formal and stylistic entity, placing

unnecessary limits on our engagement with the work of the aforementioned directors.

The importance of accepting British social realism as British art cinema is obvious. Too often the pursuit of documentary authenticity, or by extension the effectiveness of achieving genuine engagements with contemporary life, have been the criteria by which the success of social realism is assessed. However, if we move away from this sociological emphasis, and enhance our understanding of the form through the framework of the art cinema convention, our focus shifts to the analysis of authorial agency, and the manner in which meaning is derived through complex formal and aesthetic means. Re-evaluating the British social realist canon on the basis of art cinema style and authorship offers us the opportunity to strengthen and diversify the critical discourse surrounding the mode. For example, our attention may be drawn not only to how and why Loach delivers socio-political polemics, but how his often lingering treatment of landscape poeticizes this innate didacticism, or how the use of steadicam in Alan Clarke's work may connect to an overarching thematic concern with movement and space in urban environments, or how Leigh's use of static framing begins to suggest a self-consciousness of form that engages the viewer on a para-textual level. These types of readings can re-illuminate and re-contextualize well-trodden engagements with the socio-political connotations of realist cinema in Britain, breathing new life into our critical engagement with a central force of British film culture.

'Cultural tourism' or how critical voices limit our understanding of the New Wave's legacy

Perhaps the greatest legacy of the British New Wave was the way in which it moved the realist paradigm away from the closed textual parameters of the social problem film (which dominated social representations in British cinema in the 1950s) and towards social realism as filmic mode that was able to house innovative and oppositional formal and aesthetic practices. The tightly woven narratives of the films of Basil Dearden and J. Lee Thompson saw engagement with potentially subversive themes blunted through subordination to the limiting cause-and-effect model of conventional narrative cinema. The New Wave, on the other hand, privileged open-ended and episodic narratives, hitherto unseen (at least in Britain) engagements with subjective realism and temporal instability, and the development of authorially marked spatial representations that invited symbolic interpretations of environment and character.

In David Bordwell's seminal essay 'Art Cinema as Mode of Film Practice', distinct features of art cinema practice, largely drawn from European cinema in the post-war period, are collected to form a structured paradigm against which to judge films that deviate from the classical mode. These features, inherent within the New Wave, all conform to Bordwell's definition of the art cinema convention. Crucially, Bordwell identifies realism as centralizing tenet within the mode: 'The art cinema motivates its narratives

by two principles: realism and authorial expressivity. [. . .] the art cinema defines itself as a realistic cinema. It will show us real locations [. . .] and real problems [. . .]' (Bordwell 2002: 95). Elsewhere in the essay, Bordwell argues that the first tangible art cinema movement was Italy's neo-realism, which was undoubtedly the unifying cinematic influence on the New Wave directors. Moreover, the level of engagement with the internal sphere of the protagonists in *This Sporting Life* (Anderson, 1963) and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Richardson, 1962), and the subsequent loosening of causality inherent in such an enterprise, validates Bordwell's assertion of a dual realism, working on both an overt level (in terms of authentic foregrounding of environment and space) and within the more complex psychological realms of character representation. In addition, Bordwell's discussion of 'authorial expressivity' can be extended across the major constituents of the New Wave cycle in terms of films' treatment of location.

In almost all of the New Wave films, there are long and meditative treatments of urban space. Sometimes a character is framed in an isolating long take of a hill as the city lies below. At other times long-held aerial punctuation shots survey houses and factories. An example is the sequence where Frank (Richard Harris) stands alone on a hill surveying the city below him following the breakdown of his relationship with Margaret (Rachel Roberts) in *This Sporting Life*. Initially, Frank is framed from a low angle at the top of a hill in a five-second take. Then a long shot of the city is presented in point-of-view for another five seconds, before a return to the initial low-angled perspective that lasts seven seconds, and is followed by a similar close-up of the protagonist's face. In *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Reisz, 1960), after Arthur (Albert Finney) and Brenda (Rachel Roberts) go upstairs following a night in the pub, Reisz cuts to an empty street (presumably Brenda's), with the perspective from a low angle at the end of a pavement so the rows of houses and the factory in the background are visible. While this may appear to simply indicate the passage of time, as in *This Sporting Life*, the length of the sequence (in this case a nine-second take) suggests a distinct break in the narrative progression of the film. Here the viewer is asked to consider both the immediate composition and its significance to what has come before, on a supra-narrative level. As John Hill writes: '[. . .] a characteristic of the British "new wave" is its deployment of actions and, especially, locations which are ostensibly non-functional, which only loosely fit into the logic of narrative development' (Hill 1986: 129).

This notion of the 'non-functional' location can be understood as a distinct move away from the tightly wrought spatial and narrative presentation of previous realist practice in Britain. It suggests an ambiguity and a certain poetic dimension that encourages the viewer to adopt increasingly complex reading strategies:

[. . .] the art film solicits a particular reading procedure: Whenever confronted with a problem in causation, temporality, or spatiality, we first seek

realistic motivation. [. . .] If we're thwarted, we next seek authorial motivation. (What is being 'said' here? What significance justifies the violation of the norm?) Ideally, the film hesitates, suggesting character subjectivity, life's untidiness, and author's vision.

(Bordwell 2002: 98)

By introducing the idea of authorship here, we can read these narrative interruptions as moments in which the director invites the viewer to engage with a figuratively charged environment, putting aside her/his expectations relating to the advancement of what is already a relatively loose and episodic narrative. Andrew Higson partially confirms the sense in which these shots exist on a separate level to the mere delivery of narrative information:

There is a further way in which these shots can be read, however, and it seems again to cut against narrative meaning and flow. For the shots can also be read as *spectacle*, as a visually pleasurable lure to the spectator's eye. This is particularly the case with That Long Shot of Our Town from That Hill [. . .].

(Higson 1996: 134)

Higson's deconstruction of what he terms the 'iconographic cliché' of the New Wave films, is based on the apparently problematic concern of making spectacular the urban landscape, and thus negating socio-political engagement through excessive aesthetic foregrounding (Higson 1996: 134). My argument starts from the same point as Higson's and Hill's: that these motifs represent a loosening of causal connections, but rather than focus on the sociological implications inherent in such a practice, it is possible to understand these shots as positive affirmations of authorship within a wider sphere of art cinema, whereby space can be used expressively and without recourse to an apparent socio-political imperative. When viewed alongside the other examples of oppositional formal and stylistic strategies in the New Wave films, this apparently indulgent and fetishized treatment of space becomes part of a wider meditation on actuality. This alternative viewing strategy encourages the spectator to transcend their cognition of surface realism, and understand both the environments and protagonists of the films in an increasingly profound manner.

Interestingly, John Hill tacitly offers the opportunity to engage with the New Wave on the basis of its conspicuous authorship, which in turn can be understood within an art cinema discourse:

[. . .] the style and iconography employed by the British 'new wave' is obtrusive; despite the claim to realism, the directorial hand is not hidden in the folds of the narrative but 'up front', drawing attention to itself and the 'poetic' transformation of its subject-matter. The implicit statement, 'this is reality', is so transformed into a stylistic assertion of a controlling eye/I.

(Hill 1986: 132)

Here Hill identifies the way in which the poetic dimension of the films is marked distinctly via centrally disseminated points of enunciation, yet his subsequent discussion of the negative implications for the films' realist credentials negates the possibility for direct engagement with the authorship dimension. Indeed, this negative approach to authorial control, and the implied understanding of lyricism and realism as mutually exclusive concepts, is equally evident in Higson's work:

The spectator of the 'kitchen sink' film is in a privileged position, privy both to the interior monologue of the figure in the city, and to the master-shot, the all-embracing view of the city from the outside. This position of visual mastery is also a position of class authority [. . .] It is a position of mastery to which the working-class protagonist of the 'kitchen sink' film has only a limited access [. . .].

(Higson 1996: 150)

Higson suggests that this position of apparent 'visual mastery' engages the spectator and the director in a negative relationship of superiority, in which the imprisoned working-class protagonist is subordinated to our thirst for the spectacular. Thus, when Colin (Tom Courtenay) and Mike (James Bolam), and their respective girlfriends, Audrey (Topsy Jane) and Gladys (Julia Foster), sit on top of a hill and gaze over the houses, shops and factories of the city, we should be conscious of the apparent socio-political complexities of this attempt to aestheticize working-class experience. Alternatively, we can view this particular treatment of the motif alongside the film's other thematic and stylistic preoccupations: its unconventional temporal constitution, for example, or the manner in which the film's focus on memory engenders a disarming conflict between present time and recalled visual registers, leading us to view the shots on a more figuratively fertile and poetic level. This reading, based as it is on an art cinema-inclined understanding of the film's 'authorial expressivity', does not negate the possibility to engage with potentially problematic socio-political issues, and crucially, it also encourages us to interrogate the film's many subtleties and nuances (Bordwell 2002: 95).

In a wider sense, Hill's and Higson's arguments about the New Wave seem to reflect an understandable uneasiness with the connotations of a middle-class approach to a working-class subject. The New Wave directors were of course all from backgrounds far removed from the characters and environments they depicted on film. This knowledge undoubtedly informs the identification of a problematical sociological dimension within the New Wave's treatment of space, environment and character, and these criticisms can be seen to derive partially from the vociferous dismissal of the films by Roy Armes: 'Anderson, Reis and Richardson in fact follow the pattern set by Grierson in the 1930s: the university-educated bourgeois is making "sympathetic" films about proletarian life, not analysing the ambiguities of their own privileged position' (Armes 1978: 264).

By looking at the films of Shane Meadows in comparison to the New Wave, I want to destabilize these class-based criticisms. As we will see, Meadows (who incidentally grew up and still lives in the areas around where most of his films were made) shares and builds upon many of the stylistic and formal motifs of the British New Wave, defusing the possibility for similar criticisms. As Geoffrey McNab states: 'Unlike Richardson, Schlesinger et al, Meadows comes from the community whose stories he is telling' (McNab 1998: 14). By understanding Meadows' social realism as art cinema (like that of the New Wave), these sorts of limiting claims to authenticity are rendered increasingly unstable. When Meadows places one of his young protagonists against a vast expanse, emphasizing alienation from his or her environment, are we to think, as Higson does in relation to similar motifs in the New Wave, that the director is engaging in '[. . .] cultural tourism' (Higson 1996: 149)? By viewing the films of Meadows, like those of the New Wave, within a tradition and an interpretation of British art cinema, such concerns quickly fade.

Picking up the baton: Meadows and the continuing tradition of British art cinema

In Shane Meadows' debut feature, *TwentyFourSeven* (Meadows, 1997), there is a visually arresting sequence that encapsulates much of what distinguishes Meadows from many other purveyors of the realist mode, but also allows us, in a wider sense, to view his work alongside the canonic texts of social realism in Britain. Darcy (Bob Hoskins), the film's protagonist, takes his aunty Iris (Pamela Cundell) to ballroom dancing in his Robin Reliant. The two are foregrounded in the car, with two external shots and an internal framing of the pair. Meadows then cuts to a static long shot as the two sit on a pile of potatoes in what appears to be a farm yard, sipping tea. Darcy's voice is heard non-diegetically. Firstly, he sings, then speaks ambiguously about fishing, before talking about dancing as music begins on the soundtrack and we cut to a dance scene in which the music now appears to be diegetically sourced, as a choreographed dance sequence plays out in slow motion. The disarming nature of the static shot, with its barren *mise-en-scène*, accompanied by Darcy's disembodied voice-over, jars against the episodic rhythm of what has come before, with the slow motion sequence further inviting the audience to understand the sequence in a differing register to much of what else is offered in the film. Meadows explains his aesthetic choice on the same terms: 'If it had just stayed at normal speed, it wouldn't have meant much. But with the slow motion, it says, "hold on a minute"' (McNab 1998: 16). This sense of inviting the audience to pause in consideration is crucial to our understanding of the way art cinema style functions in the British realist text, recalling Hill's analysis of the New Wave style, with the directorial presence, '[. . .] drawing attention to itself and the "poetic" transformation of its subject-matter' (Hill 1986: 132). Just as in the New Wave, Meadows interrupts the apparent realist texture of his film with a stylistic flourish that demands interpretation on

a more poetic level, marking conspicuous aesthetic and formal manipulations as thematically significant.

This slow-motion motif is dominant in Meadows' films, appearing alongside non-diegetic music in *A Room for Romeo Brass* (Meadows, 1999) and *This is England* (Meadows, 2007). In the latter film, Meadows depicts happier times for his protagonist Shaun (Thomas Turgoose), in a montage set to Toots and the Maytals' 'Louie Louie'. The song starts after Shaun gets a skinhead and receives a Ben Sherman shirt from Woody (Joseph Gilgun). It is accompanied by fast cuts of static frames showing graffiti, before a slow-motion shot of the male members of the group walking towards the camera. This is followed by a cross fade to the girls replicating the movement in slow motion, before quick cuts and hand-held camera capture a game of football involving the group. The slow motion then returns with side-on shots showing the group walking in and out of the frame. The pattern is repeated and punctuated by shots of the group at play for the remainder of the song, before the movement finishes with a slow-motion reverse-tracking shot, which once more frames the communal movement of the friends. While the sequence performs the narrative function of emphasizing the bond within the group, and Shaun's place within it, the alteration of the film's stylistic rhythm again invites the audience to understand the montage on a more poetic level. Indeed, a similar montage is used later in the film to emphasize Shaun's newfound kinship with Combo (Stephen Graham) and his gang. This time, however, Meadows opts for the conspicuously elegiac instrumental soundtrack of Ludovico Einaudi. Here we are pressed to not only understand the images in terms of how they relate to Shaun's character development, but the stylistic distinctions between the sequences provide an entry point into the film's wider thematic concerns. A cover of a rock song made famous by a white band, performed by Toots and the Maytals, a black ska group enjoying a renaissance in the early 1980s on the back of the racially united two-tone scene, seems the perfect choice to convey the racial harmony displayed in the skinhead group headed by Woody. Einaudi's contemporary score, however, counteracts this sociocultural signifier, inviting us to view Combo's sociopathic racial hatred in more prescient terms.

While Meadows' use of music can be seen to derive from his fascination with Scorsese, more so than from the New Wave, we can understand this emblematic treatment of stylistic features alongside the earlier films. Richardson's *Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* possesses a similar fascination with the poeticized portrayal of human movement in conjunction with soundtrack, in the scenes in which Colin runs outside his borstal. Here, with the accompaniment of a jazz score, multiple framing devices capture aerial, medium, close and long shots of Colin as he is foregrounded consistently against the vast space of the woods. Richardson uses this thematically fertile environment as a framing facility for Colin's memorial narrative, and in doing so the sense of movement and freedom bound up within the signifiers of jazz, running, and spatial liberation effectively

subjectify the *mise-en-scène* as the flashbacks emerge. Links with Meadows are multiple here; in the first instance the use of differing aural registers as facilitators of thematic meaning corresponds with *This is England*. Here the sprawling nature of the jazz is juxtaposed against the other dominant aural motif in the film, the hymn 'Jerusalem'. This is used non-diegetically in instrumental form throughout, to enhance the representation of Colin's negative experiences (arriving at the borstal, for example) and is sourced diegetically at the borstal concert while the inmates sing, before being reused moments later to provide a non-diegetic accompaniment to the brutal beating of Stacey (Philip Martin) by prison guards. Here, 'Jerusalem', a clear signifier of nationhood, is re-contextualized to comment on the inhumanities of the country's prison system, just as music transcends the immediate narrative concerns of *This is England* to comment on wider socio-political dimensions.

Both the slow-motion sequence in *This is England* and the running montages in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* seem to suggest a poeticized treatment of movement, interrupting the flow of the narrative to consider the protagonists in motion as aesthetic objects against real environments. Similarly, in *A Taste of Honey* (Richardson, 1961), we see Jo (Rita Tushingham) walking around the ship canal in a series of shots punctuated by dissolves that frame her repeatedly as isolated against the industrial iconography of Salford. The addition of Johnny Dankworth's bittersweet jazz score encourages a sombre understanding of Jo's relationship to the space, as the familiar New Wave spatial motif of character against environment is deployed. Similarly, early on in *This is England*, Shaun is captured in a variety of alienating urban and suburban environments: on his bike facing the camera alone; washing a car; staring into a toy shop window; sitting in an abandoned rowing boat; riding into a vast and empty warehouse; and finally alone on the beach (a clear reference to the ending of Truffaut's autobiographical art cinema work *Les quatre cents coups/400 Blows* (Truffaut, 1959), an undoubted influence on the British New Wave). Whilst the narrative significance can again be drawn from the images in both the New Wave and Meadows' films, the spatial repetition, and the frequency in deployment of location as a signifier of self, encourages a metaphorical understanding that is conspicuously marked and authored.

This draws us back to Higson's reading of the New Wave, in terms of the relationship between the protagonist and her/his urban environment: 'Poetic realism at once represents and *transcends* the ordinary, the mundane, the *uninteresting*. And it also produces the working-class figure as the [...] victim in the city [...]' (Higson 1996: 155). Ascribing this sociologically inclined criticism of spatial poetics to Meadows is, as we have seen, problematic. *A Room for Romeo Brass*, which was inspired by Meadows and his co-writer Paul Fraser's childhood, regularly indulges in these kinds of environmental representations. Its opening shots show Romeo (Andrew Shim) and Gavin (Ben Marshall), in a medium-shot long take walking along a grassy hill with a rural backdrop prominent. We

later see this kind of space as an environment of escape from the town that the two inhabit. Similarly the long takes of the pair with Morell (Paddy Considine) on the beach later in the film frame the protagonists against an expansive and liberating landscape. The thematic and formal functions of this motif are also common in the films of the New Wave, with Frank and Margaret escaping Wakefield with Margaret's children in *This Sporting Life*. In these scenes, the ruins of a church in the distance persistently overshadow the emotionally fragile figure of Margaret within the *mise-en-scène*, as a constant figurative reminder of her tortured grief and bitterness. Similarly, Colin and Mike escape with their girlfriends to Skegness in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, with the empty beach working, in much the same way as it does in *A Room for Romeo Brass*, to provide the viewer with a powerful representative indicator of the protagonists' emotional spheres. Higson emphasizes urban environments, but the poeticized treatment of characters in rural spaces is equally congruent with his criticisms. In drawing parallels between the films' aesthetic and thematic concerns, one wonders how we can understand Romeo, based on Meadows himself, as a 'working class [. . .] victim [. . .]' (Higson 1996: 155)?

Elsewhere in *A Room for Romeo Brass*, as the film nears its dramatic peak (when Romeo along with the clearly unstable Morell visit the recovering Gavin), Meadows cuts to a high-angled aerial shot of the town at night, which is speeded up as if to emphasize its conspicuous nature. Such a shot in the New Wave could be understood as '[. . .] the master-shot, the all-embracing view of the city from the outside. [. . .]' that represents a '[. . .] visual mastery [. . .]' that '[. . .] is also a position of class authority' (Higson 1996: 150). Yet, by widening the terms of debate, we can recognize such a motif alongside examples from the New Wave, such as the two-shot progression that follows Arthur's beating in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. A fade to black signals the passage of the night, then a vast aerial perspective takes in factories, train lines and rows of houses; the take lasts eleven seconds, before cutting to a closer aerial perspective that lasts six seconds surveying the backs of two rows of houses, one of which is presumably Arthur's. The length of the takes, and their introduction at a pivotal moment within the film's dramatic arc, actively destabilizes plot progression, encouraging a meta-narrative engagement with the meditative foregrounding of urban environment and space. To repeat Meadows' phrase, Reisz asks us to 'hold on a minute', altering an established stylistic and formal rhythm by juxtaposing the static composition of the landscape shots against the previous scene's naturalist 'cut and thrust' of Arthur's beating, thus markedly re-engaging the conspicuous hand of the author within the diegesis.

This sense of removing space from narrative, to invite audience engagement with environment on aesthetic and thus potentially poetic grounds, is equally common in Meadows' films. In the opening scenes of *Dead Man's Shoes* (Meadows, 2004), following the introduction of Richard (Paddy Considine) and Anthony (Toby Kebbell), Meadows deploys no fewer than nine static external takes of council houses and gardens shot from a

variety of perspectives, before re-establishing the two protagonists in the diegesis. This separation of place from character and subsequent reconciliation of the two entities once more reveals a marked engagement with poetic iconography outside of the simple story-telling dimension. In similar fashion, his recent *Somers Town* (Meadows, 2008) uses black and white cinematography to re-contextualize the drab urban spaces of Somers Town in North London. Numerous static views of the environment punctuate the film's loose and simplistic narrative programme, whilst providing a diegetic parallel to Marek's (Piotr Jagiello) own interest in photographing London. Interestingly, Meadows justifies his choice of black and white on aesthetic grounds:

I actually started taking photographs of the various locations, because there was a massive range of buildings from a massive range of times we ended up with a huge variation in colour. [. . .] I had some of the photographs converted into black and white and suddenly it started to look like the same place rather than this mish-mash.

(Wilkinson 2008)

This quote reveals within Meadows a profound concern with environment not simply as a backdrop, but as an aspect of his visual repertoire that must be consciously manipulated to look or appear a certain way. This, in turn, suggests further evidence of an engagement with landscape that, like in the films of the New Wave, transcends narrative function, and foregrounds authorial control in line with art cinema practice.

While many of the parallels that I have drawn between the New Wave and the films of Shane Meadows are based on the foregrounding of authorship through an engagement with landscape and spectacle, it is possible to interrogate other features of the art cinema convention to extrapolate shared motifs. The manner in which art cinema rejects the causality of more conventional models to engage with character subjectivity, for example, finds manifestation in New Wave films such as *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* and *This Sporting Life* and Meadows' *TwentyFourSeven* and *Dead Man's Shoes*. In *Dead Man's Shoes*, the flashbacks, presented in black and white with distorted sound, do not merely relay the narrative information of the abuses suffered by Anthony (which inspire Richard's revenge). Their deployment also contributes to a clear sense of temporal and memorial ambiguity, as they emerge as the apparently subjective reflections of characters throughout the film – by definition, an irrational prospect. For example, Richard, cannot logically claim authentic ownership of the memories, yet the flashbacks are still evoked from his perspective, thus rendering the activation of the remembered narrative implausible, and once more forcing the viewer to engage with the position of the author as a controlling force. In *This Sporting Life*, the flashbacks linked to Frank at the film's outset defy narrative convention, when Margaret appears at the grave of her husband within what appears to be

Frank's internal realm. Here subjective rationality is brought into question, as it is in *Dead Man's Shoes*. As Bordwell writes: 'In the art cinema, the puzzle is one of *plot*: who is telling this story? How is this story being told? Why is this story being told this way?' (Bordwell 2002: 98). In both instances the ambiguities presented by the disjunctions in narrative linearity engage the viewer on the basis of the film's creation rather than simply its presentation as story, performing the same function as the meditative environment shots.

By identifying the common ground that the films of Shane Meadows share with the British New Wave on the basis of art cinema reading strategies, I seek to open the possibility for a wider understanding of British social realism. The shared qualities of the apparently authentic and autobiographical working-class voice of Meadows, and the middle-class surveyors of working-class experience who formed the New Wave, reveal the limitations of basing an understanding of the films' aesthetic construction on a socio-historical platform. In a broader sense, the potential for a reassessment of the New Wave on the basis of its art cinema credentials can offer a fertile point of entry to a wider review of social realism as an indigenous cinematic product of quality, which in turn invites concerted comparisons with other European and world cinemas.

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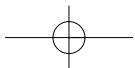
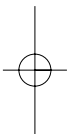
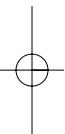
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Death is a dream: Placing *Abre los ojos* in a Spanish tradition

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Abstract

This article challenges the prevalent perception of Amenábar's films as popular entertainment more indebted to Hollywood than to Spanish cultural traditions. Through a case study of Abre los ojos (1997) it demonstrates that the film manifests oneirism in a manner consistent with the long-standing traditions employed by dominant figures of Spanish literature and drama (e.g. Cervantes, Calderón de la Barca, Valle-Inclán). The aesthetics Amenábar employs to represent dreams can also be read as a development from the Spanish surrealist aesthetics of Luís Buñuel and Salvador Dalí and stand in contrast to conventional modes established in Hollywood.

Keywords

Amenábar
surrealism
oneirism
Spanish literature
Cervantes
Calderón de la Barca

Alejandro Amenábar is part of a new generation of contemporary European *auteurs* associated with an 'international' style – incorporating genres and casting stars from and including multiple references and allusions to Hollywood films. One theme that preoccupies the young Spanish film-maker is death, which he has explored from various perspectives and genres in each of his feature films to date. Moving beyond the macabre of horror, however, Amenábar intertwines death with the motif of dreams to explore the subconscious desires of his protagonists. Amenábar blends dreams and death, confounding the technical conventions associated with reality and fantasy in a mode consistent with Spanish literary, dramatic and filmic traditions rather than the classical Hollywood traditions so apparently paid homage in other aspects of his films.

Critics have long attributed the ability of Amenábar to appeal beyond the Spanish-language market to his reliance on established genres and his penchant for visual allusions to mainstream Hollywood films. His first feature, *Tesis/Thesis* (1995), has been identified as containing visual quotations from *The Changeling*, *Alien* and *The Night of the Hunter* (Jones 1997: 34). In *The Others* (2002), Amenábar has admitted to thinking about gothic literature and films including Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Innocents* (Clayton, 1961), when working on the screenplay and creating 'a conscious homage to that type of style and era' (Mauceri 2001: 14). Perhaps the most apparent cinematic influence in his films is Hitchcock. Mrs. Danvers from *Rebecca* can be seen echoed in Mrs. Bertha Mills from *The Others* and the misty Victorian mansion could be a re-imagining of Manderlay.

- 1 My translation from the original French.

Amenábar's appropriation from *Vertigo* (Hitchcock, 1958) in his second feature, *Abre los ojos/Open Your Eyes* (1997), is perhaps the most obvious and often cited one. The Spanish director recreates the shot from *Vertigo* in which Judy, made over in the likeness of Madeleine, emerges through a hazy door frame to present herself for Scotty's approval. Amenábar himself has called his scene with Penélope Cruz as Sofia 'an explicit homage to Hitchcock – in particular to the film *Vertigo*' (Hodges 1998: 13). Not only are the framing and lighting effects of this shot uncannily like Hitchcock's iconic moment, but the context in which it occurs mirrors its precursor. César's perceived reality is called into question as the girl he believes to be Sofia (Penélope Cruz) is seamlessly replaced in love scenes and photographs with the actress who initially played Núria (Najwi Nimri), his femme fatale ex-lover who he believes to be dead. In a state of mental crisis over the apparent loss of his 'innocent' feminine ideal, César suddenly looks up in her apartment to see the original Sofia emerge from a glowing door frame, much as the platinum blonde Madeleine seems resurrected to Scotty.

Privileging quotations like this one even in his first film, critics were quick to paint Amenábar as an internationalist, working in a Hollywood mode rather than European Art Cinema, and to downplay his Spanish identity. Olivier Joyard's review for *Cahiers du Cinéma* of *Thesis* already highlights the view in the press that the Spaniard 'ignores' his own cultural referents while turning, instead, to American ones, citing Hitchcock, Kubrick and Coppola as the prime examples:

Amenábar does not want to make the cinema of his own country, of his masters or of his [Spanish] history. It is not even a question of revolutionizing the form [of Spanish cinema]. More radically, it is about ignoring it and turning himself elsewhere, towards America.

(Joyard 1996: 68)¹

Amenábar's frankness about using Hitchcock in *Open Your Eyes* supports Núria Triana-Toribio's conclusions in *Spanish National Cinema* that Amenábar's films lack 'a distinctly Spanish sensibility' (Triana-Toribio 2003: 162). Though determined not to pass judgement on the supposed lack of this hard-to-define quality (i.e. Spanish sensibility or Spanishness), Triana-Toribio is quick to note that Paul Julian Smith, the one critic who has attempted to situate Amenábar's work (specifically *The Others*) within a context of Spanish cinematic heritage, resorts to the use of the more general term 'European' in his final analysis:

[it] is reminiscent of Spanish child-centered chillers haunted by war, from Victor Erice's *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973) to *Butterfly's Tongue* (directed by Amenábar's long-term producer José Luis Cuerda). With exteriors shot in a gloomy Cantabria, doubling for Jersey, and a Spanish crew, *The Others* brings a distinctly Spanish sensibility to its material. Perhaps the most uncanny

miracle of this terrific thriller is that Amenábar has materialized a European art movie in the heart of darkness that is the US film industry.

(Triana-Toribio 2003: 162)

Although the influence of Hollywood films on Amenábar clearly comes across, often through quotations both planned and accidental, there is a discernable 'Spanishness' in his repeated treatment of dreams throughout his *œuvre*. A specific case study of *Open Your Eyes* will demonstrate that its themes and structure can be well situated within a long-standing Spanish tradition, whether Amenábar consciously acknowledges it or not.

Open Your Eyes was one of Spain's highest grossing films of 1997 and, in addition to its popular appeal, won critical acclaim with the Grand Prix at the 1998 Tokyo Film Festival (Mauceri 2001: 10). When shown at the Sundance film festival it caught the eye of Tom Cruise who reportedly immediately bought the rights to the film to produce the American remake, *Vanilla Sky* (Crowe, 2001; Russel 2002). The likeness of the Spanish- and English-language versions is striking and only enhanced by the casting of Penélope Cruz from Amenábar's film into the American one, reprising her role as Sofia. The similarities between the two films are so great at times that it would be easy to conclude that, aside from the language, the young director is working in an international/Hollywood mode. Amenábar himself might not contradict such an assessment as he has openly refuted claims that his films come out of the long-established tradition of Spanish horror. When confronted with the idea that his work follows in the footsteps of Paul Naschy, Eloy de la Iglesia or Narciso Ibanez Serrador, Amenábar denied the connection:

Don't say that. I think their movies are naïve and tacky. I don't feel I come from that background at all [. . .]. I've grown up reading comics and watching TV. That's my culture, my inspiration.

(Jones 1997: 34)²

However, despite Amenábar's self-conception, his preoccupation with the confounding of dreams and reality present in all of his films and most clearly in *Open Your Eyes* underscores a distinctly Spanish sensibility with antecedents in literature and drama dating back centuries, not diminished by Hollywood references or American pop culture. Amenábar's repeated structural technique of inserting dreams within dreams follows in the tradition of the great Spanish surrealist film-maker Luís Buñuel, who frequently broke with the classical paradigms for the aesthetics of dream sequences. In addition, I will look at a motif necessarily absent from the American version of the film, the Pierrot figure, which provides a key to the decipherability of the inverted dream/reality structure of the film, accessible to a Mediterranean audience but less likely to translate on a broader international scale. Thus, Amenábar's popular appeal may not be solely reliant on an internationalized style and, despite Toribio's pessimistic conclusions, a contemporary

- 2 Naschy is known mostly as an actor from Spanish horror films of the 1960s and 1970s. Eloy de la Iglesia also made films in this genre into the 1990s, including a Spanish version of James' *The Turn of the Screw* in 1985, and Serrador is also known for lower-budget horror films, though mostly made for television.

- 3 The appropriation of the name César has been noted as an intertextual reference to the somnambulist protagonist of the German expressionist film *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari/The Cabinet of Dr. Caligarii* (Wiene, 1920), which, through expressionist aesthetics, is revealed to be mostly the dream of one character. Though reaching beyond particularly Spanish paradigms, it is interesting to note that the name was not retained in the Hollywood version of the film possibly because references to European film history, however overt, are not sufficiently internationally comprehensible. Amenábar similarly names the murderous villain of *Thesis* Bosco, which is the Spanish for Heironymous Bosch, the Dutch artist of the sixteenth century famous for depicting visions from hell. Carl Jung said of Bosch, 'The master of the monstrous [...] the discoverer of the unconscious.' The latter case is not devoid of Spanish connections, however, as Bosch's work was collected by Spanish nobility and features prominently in art museums in Madrid (Lev 2000: 37).

Spanish national cinema may be thriving through the integration of culturally Spanish elements with those of Hollywood.

César (Eduardo Noriega) is a rich, handsome orphan from Madrid who is living off the fortune amassed by his father, who owned a chain of restaurants.³ He sits on the board of the company but does not actually have to work, and it seems that, at 25, he spends most of his time playing racquetball, seducing women, sleeping and generally enjoying his double fortune of being both rich and good looking. He begins to call his priorities into question when at his birthday party he meets a drama student Sofia, his best friend Pelayo's (Fele Martínez) new flame. He attempts to steal Sofia from Pelayo who goes home early from the party drunk. The suave César accompanies the young woman to her modest apartment, which stands in contrast to his flashy, expensive, yet cold, house. Sofia's flat is more personalized with photographs of her friends, her cat and even figurines of clowns – hinting at her occasional job dressing as a Pierrot mime in the park, which César appears to have observed while driving through Madrid in the credit sequence. Despite mutual attraction, they pass a platonic night together, with César only meriting a brief kiss before he heads home. Waiting for him outside, however, is the femme fatale Núria, a purported two-night stand who had crashed his party and appears obsessed with him. Núria coaxes César into her car and portentously asks him, 'Do you believe in God?', before driving both of them off a cliff. We are told that Núria dies in the 'accident' but César survives, albeit with hideous figurative damage to his once perfect face. The film continues with several more dream sequences and César relating them, and what we believe is the rest of his life story, to a prison psychologist while wearing a blank-faced mask to hide his perceived disfigurement.

César never seems to know if he is awake or dreaming and the audience is kept on a roller-coaster that seems to follow the form of a Möbius strip, returning to the beginning without escape. While most of the film is shot in what would appear to be a 'realistic mode' (no special effects like fog or unnatural colours/lighting and naturalistic performances), Amenábar chooses to confound cinematic conventions with respect to dream sequences by creating a wavy, expressionistic blur to the singular event later revealed to have been 'real': César's application to be cryogenically frozen and his subsequent suicide. This is the sequence that the protagonist insists was a dream because, he stresses, 'I can tell the difference between a dream and reality'. He recounts this event to his psychiatrist from within the prison cell in a 'reality' that he has, in fact, dreamed up. Dreams, which seem clearer and more sensible than reality, are a well-trodden territory within Spanish literature.

Open Your Eyes can be read to descend from a Spanish literary and dramatic tradition in which dreams and reality are continually scrutinized and reality is rarely equated with truth. This pre-Freudian elevation of the status of the dream in Spanish culture may be traced back to the veritable birth of Spanish literature with Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Despairing that the chivalry and gallantry of the heraldic knights he admires in popular

romantic texts are a thing of the past, an aged hidalgo of La Mancha, Alonso Quixana, re-christens himself 'Don Quixote' and sets out with his squire Sancho Panza, to embody a knight errant of yore. He embarks on fantastic adventures and feats of gallantry in honour of his beloved Lady, Dulcinea del Toboso. Of course, the noble deeds he purports to execute are highly embellished in his fantasies, which are never fully revealed to be a product of madness nor merely a vivid imagination. His 'Lady', Aldonza Lorenzo, is no noblewoman but rather an illiterate, loud and bawdy peasant girl from a neighbouring village, whom he has scarcely even seen. While reality versus fantasy is questioned throughout *Don Quixote*, Cervantes is rather sparse in his employment of dream sequences, which could be used to explain away so many dubious adventures. When the author does make use of a dream, in Part II, Chapter/Canto XXIII, it is to provide the fanciful hero with some moments of 'common sense' and reason, absent in his waking hours, allowing the hero to question the veracity of the events around him. This is the chapter in which Don Quixote tells his companions of his most recent adventure that takes place when he is lowered into Montesino's Cave. When the knight is finally pulled out of the cave 'little better than an hour' after he had been lowered, he is fast asleep but, upon waking and eating refreshment, Don Quixote consents to recount the 'adventures' he has experienced in what he perceives to have been three days of absence.

At three moments during his time in the enchanted cave, the hidalgo seems to scrutinize what he encounters, betraying rationality heretofore suppressed. Upon meeting Montesino of medieval legend, Quixote questions whether it was possible that the knight used a short dagger to extract the heart of his cousin Durandarte, as is recounted in the famous ballad. To this insightful question of logic the noble spectre replies that, in fact, it was not a dagger but rather a sharp poniard. Later in his description of the famously beautiful lady Belerma of the same legend, Don Quixote describes her in an unromanticized manner with a sallow complexion and much aged face as would befit a woman who has spent many years mourning the death of her lover, rather than as an eternally youthful paragon of beauty. Finally, relating his implausible encounter with his beloved, Dulcinea, in the same cave, he questions the honourability of her request for money from her elderly suitor, seeming to admit to himself that a girl in her position could only show an interest in him for her own profit (a much more realistic view of their relationship). For Cervantes, the dream state could yield truths not apparent in our conscious reality that we can subjectively alter to suit our preference.

The Spanish preoccupation with ambiguous realities continues through the Golden Age of Spanish Drama in the seventeenth century with the work of Pedro Calderón de la Barca. His most enduring work is the play *La vida es un sueño/Life is a Dream* (1636), which is about a prince, Segismundo, who is imprisoned in a tower at birth by his father, Basilio, the King of Poland, who has prophesied his son's eventual rebellion.⁴ The boy has grown up knowing nothing but the prison walls when, one day, the

- 4 An intertextual association between Segismundo and César was loosely drawn by Chris Perriam in his book *Spanish Popular Cinema* but without much development.

- 5 The citation here relates to the Clifford translation of Calderón published in 1998.

king decides to test his loyalty and worthiness of ruling by drugging Segismundo and having him awaken in the palace. The prince is so overwhelmed with his new freedoms that he abuses them and his power, committing violence against the woman he desires and causing destruction and rebellion throughout the land. King Basilio's second plan is put into action when he has the boy drugged again and returned to his prison tower only to awaken and be informed that he has been dreaming. Lamenting to his keeper, and father figure, Clotaldo, his realization that the revenge and power that seemed so real were but a dream, Segismundo reasons:

Clotaldo, and I think I'm still asleep.
And I can't be that far wrong
For if everything was a dream
Everything I saw and touched for sure
Then anything could be a dream.

(Calderón 1998: 64)⁵

Clotaldo goes on to warn Segismundo that even if he believes he is still dreaming he should treat his servant well for 'even when you're dreaming, The good you do is never lost' (Calderón 1998: 65).

In the most famous soliloquy of the play, the prince decides to treat life as though it were just a dream from which he might awaken at any moment and then he will appreciate the good he perceives around him, for the 'reality' might be far worse.

What if we suppressed
This ferocity, this ambition and this rage
Just in case it is a dream.
Yes, let's do that, for this life's so strange [. . .]
[. . .] And in this world, in the end,
Everyone dreams they are who they are
Although no-one understands this.
I dream that I am here
Bound down by these heavy chains
And I dreamed that once I lived differently
And was happy.
What is life? A frenzy.
Life's an illusion.
Life's a shadow, a fiction,
And the greatest good is worth nothing at all,
For the whole of life is just a dream
And dreams [. . .] dreams are only dreams.

(Calderón 1998: 65–66)

Inferring a transformation of character in his son from his hiding place, the king decides to give the prince one more chance and repeats the drugging

procedure to far different consequences. Segismundo awakens in the palace and behaves as a proper prince, with sound judgement for his kingdom's future and exacting punishment on the rebels who formerly incited him into revenge.

There are several parallels that can be drawn between Segismundo in Act II and César towards the end of *Open Your Eyes*. Both men are effectively orphans who find themselves locked in prisons of their own making, having lost the woman of their desires and their privileged lifestyle. With his epiphany, the Polish prince recognizes that even a king's power is merely an illusion and that all of the trappings of wealth will only cause a man 'more cares'. Another theme that runs throughout *Open Your Eyes* is the superficiality of our image-conscious contemporary society in which the beautiful and wealthy César is able to date all of the women he wants, while his more average-looking, poor, yet sincere, friend stands in his shadow. Upon losing his good looks in the car crash, César (like the prince who loses his royal position) is confronted with the falseness of his attributes as even his idealized relationship with Sofia is revealed to be superficial. Sofia shies away from his ugly face first in pity and then in disgust in their two subsequent encounters in the park and nightclub. Despairing that even the pure love he thought he had was just an illusion, César (we later learn) decides to opt for a virtual reality or dreamlike existence in which he will escape from his nightmarish life into 'the sleep of death' (to borrow Calderon's phrase). Here he can supposedly control his own dream/reality in which his face is miraculously restored by cutting-edge surgery and his relationship with Sofia is blissfully resumed. César takes the easy way out by signing a contract with a dubious company, Life Extension, to be cryogenically frozen after committing suicide to await a day when surgery really can restore his face, selecting the deluxe option of this illusory dream reality for the intervening centuries.

Segismundo – a character borne out of Calderon's Roman Catholic tradition – continues his new existence as prince as if it were a Life Extension, yet with the conscious appreciation that the mundane world is not of lasting importance. He should value each fleeting day and privilege afforded him, as the greater reality is to 'wake up in the sleep of death', perhaps facing final judgement. César, however, living in a more secular contemporary Spain, is unable to appreciate his new dream life passively and creates his own nightmare in which Sofia is inexplicably replaced by the murderous Nùria, who seems to have returned from the dead to haunt him. Having 'dreamed' that he is accused of murdering the disappeared Sofia, he creates his own fantasy prison cell in which he is interrogated by a psychologist/father figure whose conversations are edited in and interspersed throughout the film. From within this dream state existence that pervades the entire film, the masked César narrates his dreams to the psychologist conflating his real memories of suicide that he vehemently insists are dreams (life is a dream, after all) with his actual dreams, which he perceives as reality.

Metaphorical masks we wear and parts we play in society are explored throughout the film, but I would like to focus on one motif present only in the Spanish version of the film that brings into relief the film's social commentary on the superficiality of modern culture. Sofia supports herself, at least partially, as a mime artist in the guise of Pierrot, one of the well-known figures of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. Originating in Spanish-governed Naples in the sixteenth century, this stylized theatrical mode employs a selection of stock characters known as 'masques': Harlequin, Columbine, Scaramouche and Pierrot are some of the most well-known ones. Although the term probably originally referred to actual painted plaster masks worn by the actors displaying the stereotypical traits of that personage, Pierrot is the one exception. His face is traditionally unmasked but covered in white powder/paint visually aligning him with the whiteness of the moon; indeed in France, another Mediterranean country where these figures have remained popular, he is often known as '*Pierrot Lunaire*'. The motif of the Pierrot has been used by many European painters over the centuries but seems to hold particular fascination for Spanish Modernists. Perhaps the three greatest names in Spanish painting of the last century, Juan Gris, Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí, each returned to the subject on multiple occasions. The nocturnal, lunar association also explains why Pierrot is known as 'The Moon-faced Dreamer'. Within the tradition of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, Pierrot is a tragic figure of unrequited love who dreams of the day when Columbine will finally notice him. As interpreted by Sofia in César's encounter with her in the rain, she stands as a mirror of his desire to be loved by her despite his grotesque face.

As a consequence of her inability to accept him beyond an object of pity, during the outing to the nightclub he organizes with Sofia, the disfigured César dons a mask, or 'facial prosthetic', which his doctors have given him to obtain greater social integration. At this awkward encounter, he tries at first to inhabit the character of the *bon vivant* he used to be, but his false confidence turns into confrontational nastiness accusing Pelayo of having taken advantage of his disfigurement to re-ingratiate himself with Sofia. César must wear his true face, literally and figuratively, which is that of a man full of resentment and jealousy for the life lost to him. The figure of Pierrot finds expression here both as the tragedy of César's condition in a superficial world and as an oneiric motif, linked as he is to dreaming. The entire Pierrot motif is noticeably removed from *Vanilla Sky* (2001), in which Sofia becomes a dancer/dental nurse.

While the dream motif has literary/dramatic antecedents in Spain, Amenábar's layering of dreams within the dreams is a structure inherited from Spanish cinematic sources. The use of oneirism in film was taken to an extreme by the Spanish surrealists Luís Buñuel and Salvador Dalí in the 1920s with the avant-garde films *Un chien andalou* and *L'âge d'or* (1929). These films introduced the new aesthetic championed by André Breton and his circle in Paris into cinema. The cinema of the silent era was long championed by Breton as a major source of inspiration for the surrealists who

equated the experience of attending the cinema to a 'conscious hallucination' (Goudal 1978: 52). Philippe Soupault, one of the founding surrealists, once wrote: 'One can say that, from the birth of surrealism, we sought to discover, thanks to the cinema, the means for expressing the immense power of the dream' (Matthews 1971: 10). However, until these Spaniards began making avant-garde films, surrealism had not been intentionally utilized as a film-making technique.

The groundbreaking opening sequence of *Un chien andalou* involves a woman whose eye is held open by a man with a razor followed in quick succession by a cut to a close-up of an eye (actually a dead cow's eye) being sliced in half by the same razor. This horrifying montage served as a wake up call to the audience, perhaps to 'Open their Eyes' and pay attention, for they were about to experience a radically different form of film-making. The audience would then be treated to seventeen minutes of oneiric scenes with little diegetic cohesion and an abundance of irrational juxtapositions and visual metaphors gaining speed frantically to the tune of a tango. The motif of the eye is used throughout surrealist art, which sought in part to view the world from different, often irrational, perspectives and gave prominence to the status of dreams and the subconscious. The title, *Open Your Eyes*, then, not only refers to awaking from the dream state but also can be used metaphorically to call one's attention to the different ways of perceiving something, a mission consistent with surrealist ethos. Amenábar's films, and in particular *Open Your Eyes*, may be seen to be following this Spanish surrealist cinematic tradition.

Interestingly, though surrealism may have had its birth in Paris around 1924 and enjoyed an international following, the only two artists from that movement who exploit the power of dreams and the subconscious into their later work are these Spaniards, though Dalí returned predominantly to painting and other plastic arts. While Buñuel and Dalí joined Breton's circle in Paris, it is interesting to note that they had both been exposed to the work and personality of Ramòn del Valle-Inclàn while studying in Madrid. It has been suggested by scholar Diane M. Almeida that the brand of surrealism adopted by Buñuel and Dalí in their film work is an evolution from the Spanish literary and theatrical tradition of '*Esperpento*', which sought social critique through distortion and absurdist satire (Almeida 2000). In Valle-Inclàn's most famous *Esperpento* play, *Lights of Bohemia* (1920), the protagonist, Máximo Estrella, defines the aesthetic as '[c]lassic heroes reflected in concave mirrors' (Lima 1972: 36). The continuation of surrealist aesthetics by Spanish artists long after the French and other international members of the movement had moved on to other concerns may be partly explained by the long-standing Spanish preoccupations with dreams and distorted reality dating back to Cervantes and Calderón de la Barca, and carried on by Valle-Inclàn. Thus Spanish surrealism was more of a continuing tradition than one of many short-lived modernist movements.

Buñuel was the only film-maker to continue making surrealist films throughout his career, even carrying it over into a more commercial, less

overtly experimental, context (Matthews 1971: 84). Although no longer striving for a continually oneiric and frantic mode as in his silent films *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Âge d'Or*, he continued to innovate on the use of the dream sequence, often as indistinguishable from 'reality'. The use of naturalistic aesthetics for dream sequences is famously exploited in *Tristana* (1970), in which a seemingly banal, long sequence of the eponymous girl in a church bell tower is suddenly revealed to be Don Lope's dream. Amenábar similarly stages long dream sequences disguised through 'realistic' film aesthetics rather than coded as dreams through cloudy edges, out-of-focus photography or other conventional devices.

Luís Buñuel's internationally acclaimed film *Le charme discret de la bourgeoisie*/*The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) contains several dream-based sequences that may have influenced Amenábar. In one notable scene, several characters are randomly approached in a café by a young man who insists on recounting them his dream. The dream he tells (one, which, incidentally Buñuel claims to have had in his autobiography) is that of finding himself in a deserted, yet familiar street, only to encounter deceased relatives and to come to the realization that he is also dead (Buñuel 1987: 114). Not only does César recount a similar 'dream' of empty streets during the opening sequence to his psychiatrist, but, if the unfolding plot is to be believed, we are also led to the conclusion that our protagonist is dead and this entire virtual existence is a dream of the dead, not unlike Buñuel's dream. Perhaps the quintessential dream sequence in Buñuel's *œuvre* occurs later in *Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie* when one character has a dream within the dream of another character. This oneiric layering is repeated throughout *Open Your Eyes* as César is continually waking up from dreams he has and recounting dreams, all from within his dreamed existence, which can be taken to yet another level when one considers the ambiguity of the Spanish ending.

Having been made aware that his memories, since the nightclub incident, are all a dream and deciding to wake up from that nightmare into an unknown futuristic reality (in which medical science can repair his face yet without the people he knew in his previous life), César agrees to free-fall from the Picasso Tower, one of Madrid's few skyscrapers, to end his dreamed 'Life Extension'. This jump evokes the terrifying feeling everyone has had of falling just before being jolted awake. The final shot of the film is a black screen, just as it was at the opening shot, with a woman's voice telling César to be calm and 'open your eyes'. We never see him look into his new reality, unlike in the American remake, leading to the possibility that he is just awaking from a nightmare the way he seemed to awake from sleep in the beginning of the film. Amenábar thus suggests (but never confirms) that the entirety of the film is a dream. Leaving César's outcome uncertain, Amenábar follows in the path of Cervantes who never explains away Don Quixote's adventures as the product of madness. Uncertainty is also central to the work of Calderón in *Life is a Dream* as well as in other plays:

Calderon subjects his characters to a radical state of desperation before the impossibilities of unequivocal knowledge, casting them into the obsessive and vain search for certainty in a theater of illusions and marvels in which they are forced to suspend judgment and opt for less probable opinions.

(Martin 2000: 2)⁶

When we dream we are presented with often absurd or incongruous 'realities' which we blindly accept and rarely recognize from within our unconscious state to be irrational. In a sense, *Open Your Eyes* functions as a cinematic dream, for through all of its twists and turns and breaches of logical editing, the viewer must cease to question or decipher the logic of the narrative. Explanations offered are just as easily withdrawn as with the ambiguity of the final shot. In this film, Amenábar, has taken all of the ambiguity, irrationality, uncertainty, wish-fulfilment and nightmarish hauntings that characterize our dream state and created a waking dream or 'conscious hallucination' of which Cervantes, Calderón, Buñuel and Dali would be proud.

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- 6 Martin observes this leitmotif of man's inability to acquire all knowledge in the following other works by Calderón: *En la vida todo es verdad y todo mentira/In Life All Is Truth and All a Lie, No hay que creer ni en la verdad/No One Believes in the Truth Either or Gustos y disgustos no son mas que imaginacion/Pleasures and Displeasures Are Nothing but Imagination*.

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REBEL YELL: The politics of *The Celebration/Festen* (1998)

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Abstract

The *Celebration/Festen* (Thomas Vinterberg, 1998, Denmark) was the first film to have been certified under the rigours of the Dogme95 Vow of Chastity (von Trier and Vinterberg, 1995). It is also notable as a political film that presents a rebellion against an abusive patriarchal regime on the microcosmic bourgeoisie estate during the titular birthday celebration. In fashioning a comprehensive treatment of *The Celebration*'s text and its context, I open with an account of ideology that is indebted to the materialist emphases of Louis Althusser (1994) and Terry Eagleton (1991). Next, I briefly address the trajectory of Denmark's national film history out of which *Dogme* and *The Celebration* emerge. With respect to *Dogme*, I cross-examine assumptions about realism by positing it as irreducibly a style and artistic strategy (Stam 2000); in turn, I shift the accent from the quest for realism to whether *The Celebration* meets the looser standard of being surface-plausible. In detail, I discuss the film's style as it deviates from realism via shadings of foreshadowing and extensive cross-cutting. Finally, I interpret the film as a progressive (but not humourless) myth of 'bottom-up' revolt against abusive authority and the ideologies that nourish it.

Keywords

The Celebration
Thomas Vinterberg
Danish film
Dogme95
realism
ideology

Introduction

Beyond the continuing legacy of the invention of LEGOS, and the global controversy occasioned by the lamentable cartoon imagery of Mohammed, Dogme95 is perhaps Denmark's most discussed recent artistic export. Dogme (or 'Dogma' in English) is a back-to-basics blueprint for low-budget film-making that belies Denmark's prosperous standing. This article presents a detailed examination of the inaugural film to have been awarded a Dogme certificate, *The Celebration*. The film has been hailed by justifiably excited Danes as 'a major international breakthrough' (Hjort and Bondebjerg 2000: 269). Upon its release, *The Celebration* claimed the Jury Prize at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival, was nominated for the festival's Palm D'Or and was garlanded with a further 23 awards and 15 nominations at a global line up of award ceremonies (Anon n.d.).

Beyond being unique as the highly acclaimed seminal Dogme film, one question that animates this investigation of *The Celebration* is: Why do subjects (in films and beyond the cinema) often acquiesce to conditions that collide against their own interests and good ethical sense? The theory of ideology as elaborated by Louis Althusser (1994) and Terry Eagleton

(1991) presents a useful explanatory apparatus. On the materialist view that informs Althusser and Eagleton, ideology is mainly realized in practice within institutions (e.g. family, church, school and workplace) with their material concomitants. Moreover, ideology is not a rational calculus but is saturated with the hopes, dreams, fears and nostalgia that suffuse the subject's relation to the external world. At the same time, the subject within ideology is nourished by hands-on social practices with their associated schedules of material rewards and sanctions. Althusser theorizes, 'This ideology talks of actions' (Althusser 1994: 105). In the school, for example, the subject does not merely absorb lesson plans on algebra. Rather, the subject is seduced into hands-on participation in his or her future role in production (to wit, to give or take orders (Althusser 1994: 95–98)). Thus, the subject may accommodate himself/herself to even unjust authority in the visceral wish of being centred within the school (or family, or church or union) with the associated practices and rituals. At the same time, the subject may realize some of the spin-off material benefits of being a deputized practitioner of ideology within an institutional order.

On this view, films and other cultural artefacts will also tend to shore up existing power relations and smooth over a society's injustices. Fissures within unjust ruling ideologies may be more successfully sutured and glossed over in normal times. However, with sufficient intensity, the tremors of events that outrun authority may disrupt widely circulated ideologies' claims over the subject and cascade into rebellion.

If one assumes films as modern myths (Fiske 1990: 115–28), the stakes are more evident in determining how the film's many moving parts (narrative, *mise-en-scène*) generate meanings that typically hold societies together. Moreover, how do patently abusive regimes keep a lid on discontent – and how and when may they be outrun by events in a revolutionary moment? Fictional narratives may furnish provisional answers to questions such as these (that, to begin with, have no one-size-fits-all answer). With respect to *The Celebration*, I focus on the investments in tradition and the material rewards that characters realize for staying on board with the father's patriarch regime. Nevertheless, as much as fiction may suggest vital concepts, the veridical account of how ideology does – and does not – behave is finally located in the material exigencies of real societies.

In this article, I examine *The Celebration*'s stylistic signature within the Dogme framework and its refreshingly progressive politics. In cobbling together a thorough examination of the film, I situate its production history within Denmark and within Dogme. Following the attention to context, the second half of the essay stresses the film text; its style and politics. In particular, I discuss its carefully constructed style (narrative foreshadowing, editing) as well as the painstakingly calibrated arc of rebellion that the narrative elaborates. Finally, I develop an interpretation of *The Celebration* as a politically progressive film that favours the anti-ruling ideology practiced by its marginal players as they confront the wealthy, abusive patriarch and his lieutenants.

From geniality to Dogme

Astrid Söderbergh Widding posits that the so-called 'golden age of Danish film' was both brief and long ago. She places it during the 'first half of the 1910s' (Söderbergh Widding 1998: 7). Through most of the mid-twentieth century, director Carl Theodor Dreyer claimed the status of Denmark's signature screen figure with a corpus of work that includes *Vredens dag/Day of Wrath* (1943) and *Ordet/The Word* (1955). Alongside Dreyer's arty endeavours, the post-war era of the 1950s witnessed the sentimental, formula-driven and often wildly popular 'genial film' ('hyggefilm') (Söderbergh Widding 1998: 18).

How, then, did *The Celebration* emerge out of diminutive Denmark's film industry? To begin with the present, Denmark's film industry is conditioned by three principal constraints (Hjort and Bondebjerg 2000). First, with a population that approximates that of Massachusetts (USA), Denmark's size makes it exceedingly difficult to organize a profitable film industry on market terms. Second, export possibilities are dampened by the fact that almost no one speaks *Danske* outside of Denmark. Indeed, English-language films will qualify as Danish in government subsidy schemes (Hjort and Bondebjerg 2000: 22). In this vein, most of Lars von Trier's film output across a quarter century has been in English. Third and finally, the reach of the US film distribution ceaselessly exerts pressure for screen space throughout Europe (Jäckel 2003; Wayne 2002: 5–7).

During the 1980s, the international profile of Danish film was nevertheless raised by the success of *Babettes gæstebud/Babette's Feast* (Axel, 1987) and *Pelle erobreren/Pelle the Conqueror* (August, 1987). David Bordwell comments that these films – tethered to the 'European tradition of quality' – were not for him the 'revelation' that was emerging out of Denmark (Bordwell 2000: 6). For Bordwell, Lars von Trier's *Forbrydelsens element/Element of Crime* (1984) 'dared to be mesmerically stylized' to such an extent that it heralded the arrival of Denmark as a player that demanded attention (Bordwell 2000: 6). By 1999, Danish films attracted 28 per cent of the domestic box office (Hjort and Bondebjerg 2000: 11), an impressive proportion for a small nation, while commitments for state funding for film nearly doubled from 1999 to 2002 (Hjort and Bondebjerg 2000: 12). Moreover, the national film industry was accented with younger, appealing acting talents such as Thomas Bo Larsen, Ulrich Thomsen and Paprika Steen (each of whom plays a prominent part in *The Celebration*).

Von Trier has occupied a central space within the Danish film landscape since the 1980s via his films and inspiring mentorship towards younger Danish film-makers (Bainbridge 2007: 101). In the appraisal of Thomas Vinterberg, the director of *The Celebration*, the Danish industry can induce a 'claustrophobic feeling' for knowing that one will to a significant degree be 'financed by the state' and unlikely to reach audiences of millions (Hjort and Bondebjerg 2000: 271). Vinterberg adds, however, that 'Lars von Trier has taught me that he is able to make Denmark big, without leaving Denmark, and this, for me, is the ultimate ideal' (Hjort and Bondebjerg 2000: 275). Thus, it is not surprising that von Trier features in the origins of Dogme.

In 1995, von Trier endowed Dogme with its public launch by hurling 500 polemical pamphlets into a Paris conference devoted to the future of cinema; 'By all accounts, the gesture was greeted with indifference' at the time (Rose 2005: 9). Authored by von Trier and Vinterberg (1995), the *Vow* is composed of ten film-making 'commandments' that constitute a method by which to 'undress film' (Cercel 1998). The commandments are very restrictive; they include demands that filming be accomplished with a hand-held camera on location where all props are already present. Sound is exclusively recorded as filming occurs while lighting set ups are not permitted, among other substantial restrictions (Bainbridge 2007: 171–72). Despite the heaviness of the terminology that the *Vow*'s pair of authors adopted (e.g. 'Vow of Chastity'), Vinterberg recalls that it was composed in '25 minutes and under continuous bursts of meaty laughter' (Combs 2000). Furthermore, the *Vow* can trace a full family tree of antecedents including the French New Wavers' penchant for filming on location and their tolerance for technical blundering that contrasted with musty and contrived 'cinema of quality' (Thompson and Bordwell 2003: 439–48). Given other celebrated low-budget antecedents (Ken Loach, John Cassavettes), Dogme's newness may most clearly reside in the formal practice of certifying a film for meeting the *Vow*'s rigours.

Vinterberg posits Dogme as a method to rejuvenate a film-maker's technique: 'you get rid of all the tools you normally have at your disposal' such that 'next time . . . it really means something' to, for example, illuminate a scene with lamps to typical specifications (Rundle 1999). However, as documentarian Nick Broomfield observes, shooting a documentary may engender more constraint than the ballyhooed deprivations of Dogme (Rose 2005). Furthermore, the marshalling of 'a constellation of stylistic devices' that are intended to 'crystallize a strong *feeling* of authenticity' is not new, but presents a recurrent thread throughout film history (Stam 2000: 224, original emphasis). Vinterberg is also alert to the slippage in the capture of the real. With respect to hand-held cinematography as a rough-around-the-edges signifier of realism, Vinterberg comments that, 'Once, bringing a camera out into the street was a revolution – that's no longer the case' (Rundle 1999). In other words, if Dogme is a method for enhanced realism and authenticity, it traverses the same pitfalls that any such efforts have long presented: realism is inescapably a style in itself, buttressed by an array of codes to stand in for what is really real (Stam 2000).

Despite the back-to-basics impulse and seemingly severe language of the *Vow*, the resultant Dogme films have also been anything but austere. The tendency begins with the seminal Dogme film since *The Celebration* 'bristles with striking camera angles, in your face cuts and surfboarding movement' (Combs 2000: 2). Moreover, and notwithstanding the hopes for cinematic revolution projected onto Dogme, film producer Peter Aalbaek Jensen ventriloquizes his enthusiasms for it via the bank account. He observes that eight of the first ten Dogme films that his firm produced made a profit. Given the boutique-ish Dogme brand, Jensen asks, 'Who can complain about a line of very cheap films that you can sell very expensively . . .?' (Rose 2005: 9).

Although Vinterberg makes carefully circumscribed claims in interviews about the remit of Dogme (Lehrer 1998) – and despite the fact that the *Vow*'s authors both abandoned it after one film each – scholars have read more grandiose projects into Dogme. In this vein, Hunter Vaughn (2004) argues that 'film is in fact not a denotative medium bereft of ideological agency' because realism is meticulous in its efforts to 'erase its codes and render the illusion of pure denotation' (Vaughn 2004). Vaughn (2004) claims that realism is not a 'harmless by-product' but 'one of the most dangerous and effective ideological instruments'; a claim that surely applies with far greater force to news media, with its pretensions of gazing through a transparent window onto the world. However, for Vaughn (2004), Dogme is implicated in 'the agenda' of pernicious realism ('shaky shots' and 'facial blemishes behind' the cast's 'lack of make-up' (Vaughn 2004)). At the same time, Vaughn appraises Dogme as having been cut down to the banalized size of 'an anti-institution-come-institution. . . . [that] has materialized a canon' (Vaughn 2004).

By contrast, I take it for granted that, even if they may lack a scholarly vocabulary in which to express it, audiences (should and do) watch fictional films with appreciation of them as works of *fiction*. Moreover, there are fine gradations of realism such that any given film (or any scene within it) has a greater or lesser investment in realism as an artistic strategy. In analysing *The Celebration*, I am interested in flushing out moments when it enacts stylized presentation as it negotiates the restrictions thrown up by the *Vow*'s rigours. That is, I seek to avoid an argumentative endgame that identifies, and then indignantly decries, departures from realism's purities because that conclusion is always already obvious. Instead, I posit that the characters and their situations in *The Celebration* are plausible enough to enable an audience to provisionally suspend disbelief and become recruited into thoughtfully watching the film. In this spirit, one wonders whether *The Celebration*'s carefully scripted presentation of counter-ideological rebellion could plausibly endow an audience with a measure of hope in what it suggests about confronting abusive regimes and unsatisfactory realities.

Before turning to the meanings mobilized by the film as a text, I also consider *The Celebration*'s production history that testifies to the modesty of the project under Dogme auspices. It was shot on the type of hand-held digital camera (Sony flip screen PC7) that tourists use (Cercel 1998). In line with what one would expect of a Dogme-certified film, the project was supported by a budget shy of US \$1 million that was mainly allocated to salaries for the cast, extras and small crew that worked on the film (Cercel 1998). *The Celebration* was even awarded the explicitly named 'Best Low Budget Film' citation at Hungary's Csapnivaló Awards (Anon n.d.). Nevertheless, the deliberative artistic hand inevitably shapes even the stripped down, low-budget Dogme film. In particular, Vinterberg claims that 'The final film ended up very much like the script' (Cercel 1998); thus, the film aligned with its planned form on paper over spontaneous quests for correspondences with reality as discovered in filming. In shepherding the film into its final form, Vinterberg and film

editor Valdís Óskarsdóttir devoted 5½ months to tailoring 64 hours of material into a runtime of 100 minutes (Cercel 1998). This labour in turn earned Óskarsdóttir Denmark's Robert Award for 'Best Editing'.

Arc of rebellion

As important as its status as the first Dogme film is to *The Celebration*, it does not define what the film is about. Thus, I will next discuss the text itself beginning with its narrative arc. I interpret it as being a vector of rebellion against the patriarch with the associated ideological valence implied by confrontation with traditional authority. Indeed, the intensifying arc of rebellion is central to the narrative as it moves from the marginalized characters to finally sweep over the father and his loyalists.

The occasion for the celebration of the film's title is the patriarch Helge's sixtieth birthday for which his children Christian, Michael and Helene return to the family estate. A fourth sibling, Christian's twin Linda, has committed suicide. The party gathering may be construed as a significant 'boundary ritual' (Fiske 1990: 119–20) to mediate between the father's middle age and golden years of retirement for which he is beginning to plan. That the rebellion against the abusive patriarch takes place within this celebration is in the register of mordant irony. It also demonstrates how, for the Althusserian, ritual clinches the practices of ideology; it then follows that disruptive interventions into ritual may arrest prevailing ideological practice.

The arc of rebellion begins when Christian tells the gathered dinner party audience that he has prepared two speeches for the occasion and asks his father at the other end of the table to pick one of the folded up texts (green or yellow). Christian uses his speech as a platform to claim that his father Helge compelled him and twin sister Linda, as children, to pick lots in order for the father to determine which of them he would rape. Almost immediately, Christian begins to retreat from the claim, positing Helge as a very clean man for all the baths that he took. Rebellion has begun, albeit haltingly.

After the speech, Christian steps downstairs to the kitchen to say goodbye to his lifelong friend, Kim the cook. Having made the accusation and partly retreated from it, a dejected Christian plans to leave the estate and go back to Paris. However, in few words, Kim firmly encourages Christian to continue the confrontation; otherwise, 'The battle's lost'. Nothing's changed and the charge against the father appears to be the uncorroborated claim of a troubled, bereaved man in the wake of his sister's suicide. A bizarre and unplanned exchange follows when the father, who assumes that Christian had already left for Paris, unexpectedly enters the kitchen. Excusing themselves to the privacy of a wine cellar, the father *does not deny* the accusations of ritualized rape against his children, but presumes that Christian will now leave. Following the encounter, Christian passes through the kitchen, locks an intense wordless gaze onto Kim and is steeled to resume the confrontation with a second (in this case, uninvited) speech.

Following Kim's game-changing encouragement, the rebellion against the father is actively joined by the kitchen and wait staff. They are the

working class, situated in the kitchen beneath the first floor, literally and figuratively, subaltern within the bourgeoisie estate. Rebellion intensifies after Christian's second speech via Kim's strategy of keeping the guests on the premises. To guarantee an audience to the rebellion against the father, Kim tasks the waitresses with covertly gathering all the guests' car keys from their hotel rooms. Through Lars' interventions at the front desk, outgoing calls are then blocked so taxis will not be summoned. Later, Kim furthers the rebellion by locking an outwardly respectable, but violent, loyalist to the father's regime in a wine cellar, thus taking him out of play.

The next player who aligns with Christian is Helene's boyfriend Gbatokai. He arrives via taxi about halfway through the film. Having been deputized by the father to keep order, Michael immediately attempts to expel Gbatokai. Michael's xenophobic efforts are garnished with the insulting assumption that Gbatokai, an African American, is a trumpet player. After Helene arrives in the driveway and spares Gbatokai from Michael's boorish conduct, the next indignities that Gbatokai endures are from the mother. She greets him coolly and drops hints that she cannot differentiate him from Helene's previous non-Dane boyfriend(s).

Like the food service workers, Gbatokai is a marginalized outsider with regard to the party of bourgeoisie Danes in whose language he cannot communicate. He is also taunted with an overtly racist song in Danish in which Michael leads the guests. Upon arrival, Gbatokai is out of his element but reflexively takes Christian's side by offering him encouragement in a low moment and by confronting Michael in Christian's name. Thus, the most marginal elements in the scheme of ruling ideology who have the least to gain from it – workers and a non-Dane of colour – are the first to rally to Christian's side. Later, when an almost hysterical Helene is packing her bags to leave the party prematurely, Gbatokai warmly encourages her to stay; a moment that proves crucial to the endgame against the patriarchal regime when Helene moves into open opposition.

Nonetheless, efforts to smooth over and repress the truth, mainly through rituals embedded within the larger one of the party, continue for most of the film. Thus, almost 75 minutes through the film's 100-minute runtime, the Master of Ceremonies (MC) leads a rousing parade around the estate as the guests chain dance and sing with brio in honour of the patriarch's birthday. The support of the loyalists may be construed as active participation – ideology in action – expressed via song and dance embedded in ritual. Nostalgia for ostensibly sturdy, traditional male authority, heightened by the material benefits of staying onside with the prosperous bourgeoisie patriarch, may be posited to drive the guests' plausible behaviour within the fictional framework.

Like the vast majority on hand, Helene is also not in open opposition to the father most of the way through the film. However, after having been tied to a tree by Michael and other loyalists, Christian escapes from his exile and returns the letter/suicide note to Helene that Pia had discovered in the vial of pills. Helene is pushed by the MC, who speciously proclaims 'peace in the

family again', to read the letter aloud to the guests. After the distressed Helene pulls herself together to read Linda's letter, she delivers the *coup du grace* to the father's regime in her sister's words: 'Dad has begun having me again. In my dreams, anyway. I can't bear any more', reads Linda's poignant, devastating letter. It is Linda's testimony from the grave in support of Christian delivered via Helene; paedophilic and incestuous, Helge raped his own children.

Michael takes the side of rebellion belatedly, during the falling action after the letter has been read. When Michael arrives at the party, he is nearly expelled as sanction for his drunken behaviour the previous year that included what is implied to have been a rape of the waitress Michelle. Shortly afterwards, when it is apparent that the older son Christian has no interest in being part of the prosperous men's lodge, the father puts the material enticement of an offer of membership to Michael. From almost being expelled at the outset, Michael is given material incentive to identify with the continuance of the father's regime. Driven by the rewards of ideology in action, Michael subsequently behaves as an ultra-enforcer for the regime (by, e.g. forcibly removing Christian and tying him to a tree) to a degree that is complementary to his initially marginal status.

Once the regime has crumbled, the woozily drunk Michael physically attacks the father and appears poised to urinate on and/or rape him before Christian intervenes. The following morning at breakfast, with notably more restraint, Michael acts again as enforcer. On this occasion, he does so by calmly telling Helge that he should exit from the breakfast following the father's equivocal attempt at apology to the guests. Defeated, Helge turns to his wife and asks if she will leave with him. Her stony refusal signals the final judgment on the father's regime. He shuffles out of the dining room, alone and broken.

The mother's reaction in the final scene is one moment in the film that rings false with respect to the arc of rebellion. Christian claims that she was fully cognizant of her husband's crimes because she walked in on the serialized rape on at least one occasion. Moreover, she delivers a speech on her husband's behalf halfway through the film that is designed to shore up support for the patriarch's regime as the rebellion is haltingly gaining traction. The speech actively takes on Helge's dirty work and, in deference to his patriarchal authority, insulates him from having to marshal direct defence of himself. The five-minute speech also presents a thinly concealed attack on all her children that is delivered with condescension and vindictiveness. Her complicity with Helge is apparently driven by shared contempt for their children, wedded to the crass desire for continuity in the comforts of bourgeoisie life in an exchange for steadfastness at the abuser's side. In other words, the mother actively supports and participates as a deputy in the patently unjust expression of ultra-patriarchal ideology up until the moment of its demise on the estate.

Dogmatic, not chaste

The narrative arc of rebellion may be plausible enough within its fictional framework. But what about the look of the film stylistically? Although

Dogme certification is clearly restrictive, it leaves intact an array of instruments in the film-maker's toolkit with their attendant departures from strict practices of 'realism'. To wit, the film-maker may still avail himself/herself of fictional film commonplaces such as scripting, most forms of editing and rehearsals. Despite Dogme restrictions, Anthony Dod Mantle's photography presents numerous strikingly composed frames. Indeed, Mantle won two international awards for his work on the film (Anon n.d.). In analyzing the stylistic hand that *The Celebration* plays within the confines of Dogme, I will discuss the extended expository opening of the film during the first 24 minutes of runtime. I focus, first, on the fictional staple of foreshadowing and, second, on a stylized eleven-minute sequence of cross-cuts between three rooms in the family hotel that put the film's conflicts into motion.

Even as it abides the Dogme commandments, *The Celebration*'s script has a strong investment in foreshadowing. In the opening minutes of the film, Christian encounters his brother Michael, his wife Mette and their children as they pass in a car on an otherwise deserted road. Michael abruptly steps out to greet his brother rambunctiously by climbing his backside, yelling, 'I'll fuck you!' – a curious greeting. In what reads as a symptom of familial sadism reverberating through the generations, Michael expels his wife and three young children from the car to escort Christian to the party. It is a humiliating gesture towards Mette who is later seen toting the youngest child in her arms up the driveway to the estate while other guests whoosh by in cars. This inaugurates a pattern in which Michael behaves confrontationally, in appropriately and/or violently with every other character whom he encounters. Although not directly victimized by the father, from the opening minutes, Michael is a raw symptom of familial abuse and its incomplete repression.

The first meeting between Christian and his father Helge is another keynote scene ripe in foreshadowing. Shot in ominous semi-darkness, the father inaugurates talk with sexualized blue humour about a prostitute. Christian is ill at ease in being alone with his father as several close ups on his nervous hands attest. The father asks Christian to address the guests on his behalf during the dinner because he would be too upset to do so presumably due to Linda's recent death. Christian says that he has prepared remarks; these remarks will subsequently convey the accusation against the father of repeated sexual assault. Later, when Christian begins the speech by titling it, 'When Dad had his bath', the family members erupt with nervous laughter and utensils dropped. These betrayals of shared guilty knowledge also present foreshadowing and point to the film's adherence to fictional film practice over unbridled dedication to realism.

Further testimony to the film's strong measure of stylization: assured, stylized editing at the end of the exposition, from 13 to 24 minutes into the film's runtime, nails down the expository sequence in which the main characters (Gbotakai excepted) are introduced. In turn, the extended series of cross-cuts emerge out of post-production processes that fashion a discontinuous montage and that clearly depart from stripped-down film-making.

The sequence presents an extended series of cross-cuts between (1) Helene's investigation of Linda's room with assistance from Lars; (2) Michael's heated interactions with his wife Mette; and (3) Christian with Pia. The striking contrasts between the three surviving siblings set up the different paths that they take in rebellion against their abusive father.

An academic anthropologist, Helene actively investigates during the series of cross-cuts. Cleverly and methodically, she parses the clues that her sister left behind. Upon discovering what turns out to be Linda's suicide note/letter in the chandelier, Helene denies that it is anything of importance to her helper Lars. She stashes the note in her vial of pills telling herself that it must not be seen by the rest of the family. The note is later channelled to Christian, via Pia, who in turn hands it back to Helene to be read for the guests at the crucial moment when the father's regime finally disintegrates.

For her part, Helene exhibits the agonizing strain of straddling between knowing the truth and repression of it, in part via near constant cigarette smoking. After Christian's initial speech, she tries to preserve the coherence of the birthday ritual by, without prompting, explicitly denying to the guests that he was ever molested and apologizing for her brother's state of mind. Interestingly, it is the only moment in the film when anyone actively lies to efface the father's crimes. The denial occurs while the father's hold on events still appears firm and is later undone and reversed by the Helene's public reading of Linda's letter.

During the same sequence of cross-cuts, an increasingly agitated Pia describes her vast frustrations as a rural waitress to a distracted Christian. She also makes thinly disguised expressions of romantic interest in him. He fixates on a glass of water that refers to Linda's death (drowned in bathtub) and his own troubled ideation about whether to join her. In the same cross-cutting sequence, the distressed Pia takes a bath and holds herself underwater in a suicidal gesture. In the closing scene of the film, Christian will answer their long-felt mutual love by inviting Pia to live with him in Paris.

The third leg of the extended cross-cuts features Michael and his wife Mette. During the sequence, he behaves as an androgenic primitive; a strong contrast with the academic and investigatory Helene and the sombre, pensive Christian. As the cross-cutting begins, Michael initiates a blistering confrontation as he berates Mette for not packing a formal pair of shoes. In essence, Michael is making crudely traditionalist demands for his wife to act as ultra-bottom in their relationship. After the hair-raising intensity of the fight, agitated sex follows. The ensuing reaction shot in close-up on Mette's face suggests her dissatisfied resignation with Michael's aggressive technique – and the married-with-young-children trap in which she has become ensnared.

Something rotten in Denmark: interpreting *The Celebration*

Beyond its style that does not collapse into unvarnished realism, what does *The Celebration* say? In making a first pass at addressing what the film means, one can look towards the setting. The film opens with a long shot of the solitary figure of Christian as he walks through a golden landscape.

Thus, the ostensible idyll of rural Denmark is established. All subsequent scenes are set on the family estate and its restaurant/hotel complex. In its separation from the outside world, the estate evokes a microcosm of Denmark, an inference underlined by a brief shot of the Danish flag flying in front of it. In interviews, Vinterberg corroborates as he posits 'pent up aggression towards all the formalities that are observed in Denmark' (Hjort and Bondebjerg 2000: 274). He claims the film as a confrontation with a Danish society liberated from the Malthusian traps that bedevil the global south, but that is 'crippled by reason and an insistence on being mature', alienated from feeling through the rigours of 'deft repression' (Hjort and Bondebjerg 2000: 280).

In another interview, Vinterberg responds to an interpretation of the film 'as a metaphor for growing fascism in Europe' and 'the anxiety of the "foreign"' (Lehrer 1998). The director also approvingly recalls an audience member in New York who construed *The Celebration* as channelling contemporaneous turmoil in Kosovo. As Vinterberg did not have Kosovo in mind in making the film, he seems mainly interested in prompting audiences to think on their own terms.

In that spirit of interpretive liberty, I posit *The Celebration* as a progressive film text that captures the dynamics of a successful rebellion against patriarchal ideology. Despite stacked odds, the surface-plausible rebellion brings down an abusive regime. Hence, one may regard *The Celebration* as a libratory mythology that concerns humans overcoming oppression. *The Celebration* is, at the same time, attentive to the ineffable wounds that oppression inflicts on its victims. The closing sequence of the film presents Christian as having decisively prevailed over his abusive father who rampaged far beyond even the considerable remit of traditional patriarchal privilege. It is, nevertheless, an irreducibly bittersweet victory because the conflict was one that no person would ever want to engage. The final shot – a close-up on the pensive Christian – underscores the ineffable costs as, after having prevailed, he does not smile or gloat. In this manner, the closing of *The Celebration* also presents stark contrast with the sentimentalized monumentalisms that signify triumph in politically conservative cinema (Miller 1990: 213–15).

It is, moreover, impressive in itself that *The Celebration* can be called a progressive work that is counter-ideological. Films habitually circle back into the task of shoring up and qualifying their parent society's deeply seated flaws. Recuperation may occur via an impulse towards reformism within the world of the film – and/or by narratives in which the bad apples in the social barrel are confronted and neutralized. Society is thus endlessly improving while its flaws are presented as not extending beyond bad subjects of an otherwise just social order that, under stress, may lose its bearings.

Another version of frequently observed implicit conservatism in film can be located in the corpus of Vinterberg's colleague von Trier. In the von Triersian cinematic world, classical conservatism is valorized because protagonists' idealist projects against tradition are deeply flawed as a matter of course. For von Trier's fictional creations, idealist quests unleash forces that

make an unfair status quo demonstrably – even disastrously – worse. Although the failed idealist animates arguably all of von Trier’s films, *Manderlay* (2005, Denmark–Sweden–Netherlands–France–Germany–United Kingdom) is perhaps the clearest case. Grace’s campaign to dismantle an apartheid regime collapses in on itself and leaves the community even more vulnerable and pauperized for the idealist’s quest to reorder human nature (Goss 2009: 130–35, 158–66). By contrast, Vinterberg’s *The Celebration* presents a revolutionary vector on the bourgeoisie estate through which the abuse commissioned by the traditional patriarchal authority is confronted and disabled; as noted, at considerable cost, but with dignity realized.

Conclusion: but seriously . . .

The Celebration is no humourless film, despite its subject matter and even as it challenges the viewer to negotiate among distinct moods. In this vein, Ib Bondebjerg observes that ‘the film blends black satire with dramatic and comic elements’ (Hjort and Bondebjerg 2000: 281). Banter between the party guests betrays the vacuity at the core of bourgeoisie life as, for example, they debate whether they are eating lobster, salmon or tomato. In other moments, *The Celebration* presents contrast between the tumult of the cascading struggle between Christian, Helge and their allies, and the ideology-enabled ritual of the bourgeoisie birthday party that lurches forward despite Christian’s eruptions. In one instance, the oblivious grandmother sings a sentimentalized panegyric to Denmark’s forests to the dinner party audience that humours the frail woman. Christian riotously enters the dining room as the grandmother sings and, in the teeth of the father’s lieutenants’ efforts to suppress him, makes a graphic accusation of serialized patriarchal sexual abuse before the whole gathering. Following Christian’s earlier accusation of murder against the father for Linda’s death, the MC calls with straight-faced absurdity for a piano interlude to smooth over matters. Shaken, the guests nonetheless quaff cocktails in the well-appointed bourgeoisie salon.

Ruling ideology regularly functions to gloss over injustice and nourish authority through emotive appeals to tradition. By contrast, *The Celebration*’s most oppressed subjects refuse to heed the patriarch’s command over resources and cancel their participation in ruling ideology. And they finally prevail, while the film rejects a falsely sentimentalized happy ending of reconciliation. The narrative arc simultaneously presents surface plausibility (distinct from the baggage of ‘realism’) and is riveting as allegory; an exquisitely measured combination of elements that makes the first Dogme-certified film striking in multiple registers.

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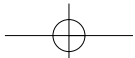
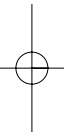
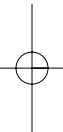
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